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MELLOW TRAVELLERS

OR,

THE EXPERIENCE OF LIFE.

BY

THE AUTHOR OF

"MARGARET; OR, PREJUDICE AT HOME."

&c. &c.

IN THREE VOLUMES

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THE EXPERIENCE OF LIFE.

CHAPTER I.

THE letter received by Avice, as related by Dr. Frank, ran as follows:—

“ Sept. 30th, 18—.

“ If Mrs. Thorpe, of Moorlands, be still living, she is earnestly desired to proceed, as quickly as possible, to the residence of Clementina, Countess de Torres, at No. 90, Sloane Street, London. The Countess is an invalid, or she would herself have written.”

• Her sister was living, then; she had married again; she might be dying. A rush of unde-

finable emotions combined to overwhelm her; but joy was uppermost, for her sister had not forgotten her, and they two would meet again. Breaking away at once from the life into which she had never grown, she seemed to breathe more freely, as if the old familiar atmosphere was around her—an atmosphere so redolent of the old love, of the still cleaving partialities and prejudices of old, too, that she instantaneously underwent not only an inward but an outward change, that imparted elasticity to her step, and confidence to her manner, and flooded her face with a spiritual light beautiful to see. The stagnant waters of her existence were broken up into waves that glittered as in the rays of a rising sun; the full tide of a far-off sea burst into and bore them onward; and the dreary shores disappeared; and the widening prospect revealed glimpses of a country almost as glorious to behold as had been that of her first dreams. The blood leaped in her veins; her heart sent forth an audible shout of joy; she almost forgot that Phillip and Blanche were no more; that Clementina had never regarded her with true sister-love; that her own youth was a thing of the past.

Sobering a little at length, yet keeping with

sure foot the new ground she had taken, she recalled to her recollection the obligations and responsibilities that must fetter her in renewing an intercourse with her family. Her husband's dying words allowed her the fullest latitude; but, respecting his wishes and prejudices as he had at last respected hers, she felt it incumbent on her to keep silence until she was at least assured that the Countess de Torres had no decided objection to acknowledge as a relative the daughter of Edward Thorpe. Avice had not so far put away from her her later life as to have abated one jot of the respect and reverence in which she held her husband's memory. For what he had been in himself, and to her, she honoured him as he had deserved to be honoured; and she was now prepared to lift her head proudly as the widow of a worthy man.

Beating down the obstacles placed in her way by her sisters-in-law with a determined will, at length Avice found means to quit the house, taking with her only a small carpet-bag, and shaping her course towards Selby in the early dawn with wonderful precision. There she arrived in time for the early stage, that no longer performed the whole journey as of old, but stopped at a station some miles distant. There

Avice first became acquainted with the wonders of steam—for the world had not been idle while her interest in it was dying a slow death. The train reached London just at nightfall; and a cab that had a very hurried look, and a cabman to match, drove the recluse of Burnham Crags and of Moorlands on to Sloane Street.

She had journeyed thus far towards the place of her destination before she sobered down into a state of mind that admitted of misgiving. When only a few minutes intervened between the meeting of herself and her sister, she began to dread it—to remember above all things that Clementina had always been haughtily proud; that she had risen in station since they last met, as her title testified; and that at the best she had never shewn such affection as might now be needed in order to put away the thought of differences of rank. It was because Avice's own heart was overflowing with sisterly love—because she was already overwearied with repulse and contention—and not because she was at all prepared to blush for the name she bore, that these misgivings came over her. She felt that she must school her feelings; that she must take the initiative from the Countess de Torres, and meet her sister as if they had only

Arted yesterday, if, as was most probable, the latter so willed that it should be.

Arice was too imperfectly acquainted with London to understand that Sloane Street was by no means an aristocratic quarter. She expected to find her sister inhabiting a splendid mansion, surrounded by luxuries, and attended by the whole bevy of servants indispensable to a large establishment. Her surprise, therefore, was great when, after having knocked loudly at the door of No. 90, the driver opened the door of the cab, and she alighted and came at once in contact with a very untidy-looking servant woman and the narrow passage of her sister's house. A little pleasure mingled with her surprise—a little regret also. The absence of state was a satisfaction to her, though it caused her to fear that her sister had met with reverses—might even now be reduced to circumstances bordering on distress. Then the ready imagination and heart together suggested that Clementina might require such help as it was now in her power to give. Perhaps—oh, happiness, if it might be so!—the Countess de Torres, wearied with the world, and subdued by misfortune and failing health, would be willing to pass the remainder of her days with

Avice at Moorlands. Perhaps—Avice went on, imagining all that she wished might be; but we must leave her imaginings and enter upon the realities.

The untidy servant acknowledged that the Countess lived in the house.

“ You’ll be Mrs. Thorpe, I expect ? ” she added.

Avice acknowledged that her name was Thorpe.

“ The Countess is a-bed,” continued the servant; “ she lies a-bed near all along. You’d best sit down somewhere while I let ‘em know you’re come. This,” opening the door of the front parlour, “ is Mr. Lane’s room; but he ain’t in, nor likely to be in yet awhile. Darn him, he’s let the fire go out, as he al’ays does; but I’ll light the gas if you’ll wait a minute.”

Avice seated herself on a chair near the door, and awaited the return of the servant, who had vanished. Presently in her place appeared a stout, middle-aged woman, the landlady of the house, for it was a lodging-house. This personage lighted the gas; invited the new-comer to take a seat on the sofa; and then placed herself so that she could take a good survey of

Avice, while entering into a conversation with her, that had an unsuspected object.

For Mrs. Rouse—who had had to deal with some ugly customers in her time—was troubled with much misgiving as to the means and even the respectability of her lodger, the Countess de Torres, who had occupied two of her apartments upwards of a month, and given herself great airs, but who had not yet paid a single penny, or been visited, except two or three times by a gentleman, who might be what the Countess represented him or not. Mrs. Rouse's niece had, at the request of the Countess (the latter's own maid being a Frenchwoman, and incapable of writing English), penned the epistle to Mrs. Thorpe: and now Mrs. Rouse brought her experienced eye to bear upon Mrs. Thorpe; and a very brief survey satisfied her that nothing satisfactory was to be expected in this quarter.

It was a truth that there was nothing imposing about Avice. The natural result of her singular position during so many years—of the complete ignoring of many of her highest qualities, the coercing, and misdirecting, and crushing down of her energies—was, that both in look and manner she lacked the decision and dignity (or effrontery, as it might be), the self-posse-

sion and ready confidence in and putting forth her own powers, only to be found in those who if they wear fetters voluntarily put them on, and altogether know what they are about. Avice was all afloat—a child of impulse, as she had always been; but more timid than she was in her girlhood, because in her later days she had never been able to take possession of any certain ground.

This failing demeanour struck Mrs. Rouse at once. Coupled with it were the deteriorating facts of Avice's unstylish dress, and mean provision for a visit of any duration. For Mrs. Rouse had already learned from her servant that the small carpet-bag which Avice still grasped in her hand was the latter's sole luggage. Under these circumstances, Mrs. Rouse dropped all ceremony at once.

"The Countess—I always forget the name—is known to you, of course," she said. "May I ask if you have known her long?"

Here was another occasion of faltering for Avice. Her sister, it seemed, had not acknowledged the relationship between them, and might not intend to acknowledge it.

"I have known her from my childhood," she said, briefly.

“Then you know the Count de—what’s his name—I suppose?”

“No. I never knew him.”

“Do you know how long she’s been married to this Count?”

“I do not.”

“Then, between you and me, Mrs. Thorpe, I don’t believe she was ever married to him at all. I’ve thought so a long while. Mine is a respectable house, and I can’t stand to be disgraced by my lodgers. And I can’t afford to lose by them. I’ve never seen the colour of the Countess’s money, and I don’t expect that she has any. If she’ll leave the house at once, I’ll forgive her the debt; and you may tell her so.”

Avice, at all times literally thrown upon her impulses as a resource, came out now. Her shattered nerves helped to spoil the effect of what she said, for she trembled while she spoke.

“The Countess de Torres was a gentlewoman to begin with; she is descended from a race that never stooped to dishonour. What she says I believe to be true; and with regard to her debt to you, I am ready to pay it this moment; but I do not choose to pay it, believing that such a procedure is needless. I

wish to see the Countess ; is she aware that I am here ? ”

When Avice was dragged out in this way, she made an impression of some kind. Her offer to pay the Countess de Torres’ debt chiefly impressed Mrs. Rouse, who thought it might be as well to be civil under the circumstances, and so said—

“ I believe the Countess has been informed of your arrival ; but I’ll see ; I’ll send her maid to you.”

Mrs. Rouse quitted the room, and presently the French serving woman entered. She was young, but not prepossessing in appearance. She said—

“ Mi lady hopes to see you, Madame ; I shall show you to her.”

Avice followed this attendant up stairs, and was ushered into the front drawing-room. It was separated from a back room by a folding-door ; and for some time Avice was left to herself. At length the folding-door was half-opened, and she was desired to walk forward.

Avice had been forced into a new state of feeling. She had been so impressed by the apparent necessity of at once protecting her sister, that when all the barriers were withdrawn, she

rushed impetuously forward, giving full vent to every emotion of her heart, that beat audibly as she threw her arms round her sister's neck.

"There, that will do," said the Countess de Torres, struggling to release herself, "why, you're a child yet, Avice. How like old times this is! But I'm not surprised—not at all. Sit down quietly, and let me look at you. You have really changed very little any way."

In saying this, what the Countess de Torres meant was, that Avice was as great a fool as ever. There had been little change on either side; and yet Avice fancied that there was great change in her sister outwardly. Her large, showy person, her countenance with its very decided features, had become coarse. This was apparent enough, though the coarseness was toned down by a becoming morning cap and wrapper, for she found the Countess in bed.

"I am so happy to see you!" said Avice, her eyes glistening with unshed tears; "I cannot tell you how happy!"

"Oh, of course! and it's very good of you really," said the Countess de Torres. "Dubois, leave us, and shut the door. As I was saying, Avice, you appear to be little changed. If this light does not deceive me, your complexion is

very good. Well, I am really glad to see you, and I want to know all about your affairs. I sent that letter at a venture, not knowing whether you were living or dead. Who are you in mourning for?"

"For my husband," said Avice; the more sorrowfully because she had already discovered that the Countess de Torres was unmistakeably the Clementina of old.

"Good God, how fortunate!" exclaimed the latter; "I mean (correcting herself) what a good thing it is that I shall not be required to meet him, which I confess I should not like to have done. Have you any children?"

"I have one daughter, who will be sixteen years of age in a few months."

"And you are left in what is called comfortable circumstances, I suppose—you have a competence?"

"Yes. I am quite able," added Avice, eagerly, "to help those I love; and what higher happiness could I have hoped for at any time? You must make me useful to you, Clementina, if you would make me happy."

"Oh, I'll make you useful, never fear; usefulness is your forte, I believe. And to tell you the truth, I was thinking of this talent of yours

before I sent for you. I confess myself to be in a strait, Avice, I require your services. I protest to you that I have parted with my last penny. My landlady here, as is the nature of all landladies, is clamorous in her demands ; have you seen her ? has she spoken to you ?”

Avice, fearful of wounding her sister’s feelings, briefly said that she had seen her—that she had spoken with her.

“ What did she say ?” demanded the Countess. “ Oh, don’t hang your head in that way. I’ll tell you what she said, if anything—that I was an impostor ; that the Count de Torres was a myth ; that I had never paid her a penny since I entered her house ; that my one visitor was an equivocal personage, and myself something worse. She has said all this to me without making use of words. I don’t intend that it should come to words between us two ; but she has said the words to you, I know.”

Avice acknowledged that she had — Avice, who seemed singled out by fate to meet only what was painful at every step. But Avice rose above fate now ; and in a burst of wasted feeling she implored to be permitted to help her sister at this need.

“ Well, really you are a good soul,” said the

Countess, sinking languidly on her pillows. "I suppose, now, you wouldn't mind paying my debt to this woman?"

"It would afford me pleasure to do so," said Avice, inevitably chilled by her sister's manner. "If I may hope for no higher happiness, at least permit me to know this."

"And have you really ever dreamed of a higher happiness than was within your reach?" asked the Countess. "Your pleasures always seemed to me to lie in small compass!"

For once in her life the truth was wrung out of Avice so far as to find utterance on her lips. "If hitherto I have only dreamed of happiness worth the name," she said, "my awakening must be sad indeed. My dream-days are over, and I have prayed for power to cope with realities. Forgive me, sister, if I feel wanting in that power just now."

"But that is the power in which I hope I shall not find you wanting just now," said the Countess. "I have declared my whole circumstances to you, do you intend to desert me?"

"Oh, no, no!" said Avice, holding out her arms, and her whole heart. "Make what use of me you will, you must know what I wish to do."

The Countess protested that she did not know what Avice wished to do, and begged to be enlightened. Avice at once opened her whole heart—as profitless a work with her as sealing her whole heart had been before time—and before she had fairly come to an end of what she had to say, the Countess de Torres burst into an uncontrollable fit of laughter.

“I really do feel obliged to you,” she said, wiping her eyes, when at length she was able to perform that office; “but you must allow me to say, that the mistakes of this life are too absurd. You have been quite happy in a savage solitude, and amongst people only a little removed from savages; but I am differently constituted, and must sojourn amongst civilised people so long as I live. Seriously, my dear, simple Avice, I cannot live at Moorlands,—the very name of the place makes me shiver,—if I die a beggar. But don’t fret about it; you can help me, notwithstanding. I want to see in you the spirit to help yourself. Surely, you have not forgotten that you are the descendant of a proud noble race, and that however circumstances may have kept you down for a time, you have a right to rise to your true position if opportunity offers. That opportunity offers now. Ah, Avice

what power you might have wielded long ago, if, to begin with, you had understood the world as I did!"

Avise glanced back mentally, and wondered what was the power that she *might* have wielded, and said nothing.

"You are so differently constituted to myself," continued the Countess, "that I scarcely know how to deal with you. You seem to have readily given up all ties of kindred; to have easily attached yourself to low people. That was the reason why I did not correspond with you sooner."

"Let all that pass," said Avise, somewhat proudly, and suppressing a spasm of pain that tightened about her lips as she spoke. "I wish to speak only of the present."

"That was sensibly said. I really am glad to see that you have improved with time, Avise, in many respects. You cannot deny that you were very romantic in your girlhood; and to tell you the truth I dreaded our first interview, because I apprehended a scene. Those who are accustomed to the highest society cannot tolerate scenes."

"I understand all that," said Avise. "The world drives us to God, who is expected to tol-

rate much. You said just now that it was in my power to serve you in some way."

"But not in the way you proposed, you silly little thing. I assure you, Avice, that your whole annual income would scarcely supply my ordinary expenditure for a month. In that time I have spent as much as fifty pounds with my perfumer alone. I must live decently if I live at all; and if I am ever thoroughly broken up, I shall be ready to die at once."

"You only mocked me, Clementina, when you said that I might help you. May I ask if the Count De Torres is living?"

"Oh yes, he's alive, but I really cannot inform you where he is just now. We separated by mutual consent, and for peace sake, finding that we could not agree in many matters. He was certainly a most extravagant person, and a gambler to boot, and he got himself into so many unpleasant scrapes that really I was compelled to cut the connection. That was three years ago. I had resources of my own, and have always been enabled to keep up a certain sort of style. I assure you I have never been in such low water as I am just at present; but I trust to lift my head again shortly—with your help," she added, laughing, "as I told you just now."

“ Lieutenant Renshaw has been dead many years, then ?”

“ Yes, he died what is called early ; but not at all too early for him, for positively he was born to be unlucky. But we won’t talk about it ; as you wisely said, we had better confine ourselves to the present.”

The Countess paid Avice the compliment of not honouring her with her confidence. Had she entered into the details of her not always reputable life, with its heartlessness, its follies, and intrigues, Avice might have been sufficiently shocked to have in return shocked the good breeding upon which, above all things, the Countess prided herself.

“ When I married the Count, about ten years ago,” continued the Countess, “ we resided at a splendid mansion in the quartier St. Germain. Amongst our crowds of visitors was Lord Otley, then abroad on a tour, and we certainly entertained him magnificently. Indeed, the Count made a point of distinguishing Otley above others ; for he, like poor Renshaw, reckoned a good deal on this connection of mine. But Otley, besides being a great fool, which, perhaps, you don’t know, is one of the most selfish persons alive, and of course he failed us altogether

when his services were required. On my coming to England a month ago, I was quite willing to overlook this unfriendliness, and I certainly expected that Otley, who has since married, would return the civilities I had shewn him in Paris. But no ; he and the whole set chose to keep aloof. I assure you that now I am rather glad of this ; I anticipate a great triumph over them."

Avice could not help admiring her sister's spirit whilst marvelling at it. Certainly Clementina seemed formed to encounter the battle with circumstances that to begin with had been one certain portion in life for all Colonel Desborough's children. She admired and marvelled because having suffered so much, having lost one husband by death, and another through estrangement ; having undergone great reverses, and met with unkindness and ingratitude, Clementina still bore up so bravely. All her knowledge of her sister's character did not enable her to comprehend, that being cold of heart and not in the slightest degree sensitive, or scrupulous where an end was to be served ; that being fond of dash and show, and ready to gratify her taste at any price, Clementina had really never suffered at all ; but enjoyed herself greatly in her own

way, as she was quite ready to admit. Taking the view she did, Avice could not help giving some expression to her feelings. *

“ My poor sister,” she said ; “ how much trouble you must have undergone ; and how well you seem to have borne up ! ”

“ Yes, thank you, I have borne up pretty well,” said the Countess. “ The fact is, Avice, I knew, to begin with, that if I gave way to fretting I must make up my mind to early grey hairs and wrinkles. On the contrary, I made up my mind to laugh at everything. I have certainly taken everything easy ; and depend upon it grief of any kind is only a sort of rebellion against the dispensations of Providence. I have not that great sin to answer for. Tears spoil the eyes, and fortunately I was never in the least given to weeping. Time fades us soon enough without calling in the aid of sorrow.”

This speech was peculiarly repelling and painful to Avice. To this disposition in her sister, then ; to this systematic putting away from her whatever was disagreeable, she owed the entire neglect of herself in those old, sad days, during which trouble had gathered around her so thickly ; during which her heart had so yearned for sympathy ! Avice had hoped to find eventually

some very different explanation of the silence and neglect that had helped to cloud her own whole life.

In her simplicity she felt fairly abashed, humbled by the bold avowal of the Countess, and dropped her eyes and blushed;—blushed either for the kindred blood or the common humanity that linked the two together.

“I think,” continued the Countess, who spoke with great volubility, “that you are looking remarkably well—making allowance for that odious black dress of yours, and the fact of your having just undergone the fatigues of a long journey. Do take your bonnet off, and let me examine you more closely.”

Clementina had not forgotten that in the old days at home, down at Stanley Place, nothing was so easy as to put upon, or command, or otherwise deal cavalierly with Avice; and Avice had not forgotten, or had not changed; for she took off her bonnet at once, and at her sister’s bidding exposed her still fair face to the full light.

“I like your hair, it is very nice,” said the Countess; “Dubois will be able to make a good deal of it. I’m glad you don’t wear those odious widow’s ~~steps~~ caps. How long has your husband been dead?”

"Yesterday was the anniversary of his death," said Avice. "It struck me as a singularity that I should receive your letter on that particular day."

"Dear me, how accurate you are about dates," said the Countess. "Do you know, I never could remember dates. I don't know how long it is since Phillip died, for instance. Well, upon my word, I'm pleased to see you looking so well; really young, though you must be at least thirty-seven. I dare say your quiet, humdrum life at what-do-you-call-it, has suited you and helped to preserve you. So far it is all right. I think you might put off mourning now; you are very pale, and black does not become you."

"I have no intention of putting off my mourning at present," said Avice, quietly, but quite determinedly.

"Ah, well," said the Countess, "we won't quarrel about that. And you really liked the boor—I mean, the man you married?—you had a sort of love for him?"

"He deserved far warmer love than mine," said Avice. "I honoured him in life; I honour his memory now."

"That seems very satisfactory; very indeed," said the Countess. "I think it will—it is

quite right, I'm sure. But Avice, in those early days, up to Phillip's death, for instance, if you had been allowed a free choice, would you voluntarily have chosen the man who became your husband?"

• "Perhaps not. But why the question? I have told you that I still honour my husband. He was one of the worthiest of men."

"Worthy men are surely not scarce. Do you mean to say he was the first worthy man you met?" said the Countess, regarding Avice intently as she spoke.

"By no means," said Avice, solemnly.

"Then if you knew other worthy men, did you know any one amongst them that you would have preferred to him?"

"Why do you ask this?" said Avice, with a troubled look. "I thought it was agreed that we should not speak of the past."

"I only speak of that in the past which has reference to the present," said the Countess. "If all the past was to be acted over again, would you choose the same lot, supposing you were left to a free choice?"

Avice betrayed her consciousness; she became pale with emotion. But she was too true to herself and others, too noble in nature,

to lift the veil of all the past before the cold-blooded woman who now seemed bent upon probing her to the quick. She resumed her composure almost as quickly as she had lost it.

"I cannot enter upon speculations of this kind," she said. "I cannot declare that I regret what I have done. If I regret anything it is that I was too unworthy of the love I won, and have lost."

"Well," said the Countess, pursuing an advantage that she thought she had gained, "I was only thinking—believing you to be of a grateful nature—that you were too unmindful of *one* friend who really did not deserve to be forgotten. You *seem* to have forgotten *him*, and I pity him, for he certainly has never forgotten *you*. Such devotion and constancy I never met with before—and all to be thrown away! Oh, Avice, even for Phillip's sake you might have had a thought of Walter Osborne!"

A thought of Walter Osborne! Had there eyer been an hour of Avice's married life during which she had not thought of Walter Osborne? Not in the aspect in which the Countess de Torres now sought to place him before her; but as Phillip's faithful and generous friend; as her own true friend for Phillip's sake; as a noble

man every way ; as a man whose powerful character and genius commanded the admiration of the country that claimed him, as it claims whatever conduces to its own glory ? Oh, yes ! Avice *had* thought of him ; she did not deny it ; she eagerly averred that his kindness in the past had always been present with her—his kindness which she had never acknowledged as she ought to have done, as she wished to have done. In her earnestness she lost sight of the suggestions of the Countess, that yet had some root in her own heart. This dear, kind, true friend ! What of him ?

“ Oh, I know nothing, except that he’s dying to see *you*,” said the Countess. “ I suppose I must acknowledge that for years past he has constantly worried me about giving him your address. I saw how it was with him, and did not like to acknowledge that you were married. I did not like to acknowledge that through your marriage you had fallen so low—socially I mean. I professed my ignorance as to your whereabouts ; and of course, after a lapse of time, I could not speak with any certainty. When I came here, about a month ago, of course I remembered Mr. Osborne as an old friend of the family. I wrote to him, and he came to me immediately. His

first question was, ‘ Have you any news of your sister Avice ? ’ ”

The Countess paused, looking steadfastly at Avice. Avice, touched as she was to her heart’s core, could not help wondering, with a great wonderment, at the perfect coolness with which her sister acknowledged so much that did not tell to her advantage—except as a woman of the world. She had nothing to say ; and the expression of her face was a blank to the Countess, who went on :

“ To tell you the whole truth, I acted in the first instance under the advice of Lady Otley, who assured me that you and Blanche were well provided for. (Poor Blanche ! it was a good thing she died as she did, and some day you shall tell me all about it.) When you wrote to inform me of your marriage, of course I was at rest about you—in one sense. We’ll let all that pass. When I saw how persevering Walter Osborne was, how constant he was, I determined to write to you at a venture. I had kept your address through all those years, so don’t say I had forgotten you. I wrote at a venture, of course ; you might have been dead ; you might have changed your place of abode ; I didn’t know ; however, everything has happened luckily, and now Mr. Osborne will be satisfied, I hope.”

The Countess ceased, looking as satisfied as she professed herself to be. Still uppermost in the mind of Avice, stirred to her soul's depths as she had been by what she had heard respecting Walter Osborne—was that wonderment at the bold avowals of the Countess, that increased as the latter went on, leaving Avice no room to suppose that sisterly affection had had any part in bringing the two together. Avice could not have marvelled more if she had understood the whole truth—that nothing short of hoping to profit in a pecuniary way could have induced the Countess to resume any intercourse with herself; Mr. Osborne, to whom she had applied for assistance of that lowest kind, having declined giving any until he was furnished with some clue to the missing sister of his friend. All this humiliating knowledge was spared Avice; and also the knowledge that in consequence of finding her sister a widow, and of a new idea having entered her mind, the Countess hoped to turn her own condescension to some good account. The latter pictured to herself, and at no distant day, Avice managing the wealthy Mr. Osborne, and herself managing Avice.

•In striving to bring this about, the Countess inevitably committed many blunders, even at the

outset. Her precipitancy and coarseness alarmed and revolted Avice, whose original delicacy of mind and simplicity of character were unimpaired. Her own earnest desire to see Walter Osborne was checked by this disposition in the Countess to put a wrong construction upon the motives of her brother's friend, whose feelings with respect to herself she could understand well, judging them by her own. In a situation of this kind, Avice was as certain to act with becoming dignity and decision, as she was certain to yield to the pleasure of others in matters of lesser moment.

"Mr. Osborne was my brother's most attached friend," she said, "he was my kind friend to an extent that few have been. Our meeting, if we meet, will be a very solemn one; for the scene in which we last met and parted must be present with both. What you have surmised respecting him has no foundation in truth, and is most distasteful to me. If I did not feel and know this, it would be impossible for me to meet him at all. Understand this, and spare me all unnecessary pain on this one subject at least."

"Yes, Countess de Torres, keep silence henceforth—make no further advance in this direction; for it is holy ground upon which you

would most sacrilegiously intrude ; and your unabashed worldliness, and grovelling thoughts, and ribald words, are an offence to the sanctifying, the solemn, and unutterable emotions unknown to such as you !

• “ The silly little prude ! ” muttered the Countess to herself, “ does she fancy I can’t see through her ? I must manage her in another

“ Of course you two will meet as very dear old friends,” she said aloud ; “ and it does strike me, Avice, that no one as yet has ever sufficiently thanked him for his kindness to Phillip, which certainly was very great. His attachment to Phillip was certainly something extraordinary ; for I have positively heard that he has resided all these years in Phillip’s chambers, with all the old rubbishing furniture about him, just as it was left, and he won’t have a thing removed out of its usual place. Did you ever hear of anything like that ? and he so rich as he is, with a fine park and mansion, somewhere down in the country, that he never goes near ? It is to me perfectly unaccountable, unless I am to suppose that he is a little insane, and I don’t think he is.”

• Avice said she thought not, and that was

all. She did not tell the Countess de Torres that this was no news to her. She could not dwell on the subject at all with one so incapable of understanding her feelings, and so utterly heartless in herself as the Countess seemed to be. The latter, in her turn, marvelled that Avice, usually so impressionable, could receive the information she had conveyed to her without evincing any emotion, and then, tired of the subject herself, turned to other matters.

And first it struck her that possibly Avice might be hungry. Avice acknowledged that she should like some tea. She had not eaten a meal since her tea of the previous day ; for being a novice in such matters, she had by some means—she scarcely knew how—lost the cup of coffee and the sandwich for which she had paid at a refreshment stall, while the bell was ringing for departure. Her only food had been a few biscuits.

“ Dear me ! why didn’t you say so ? ” exclaimed the Countess. “ I fear you are as unfit to take care of yourself as I always thought you were. When you first came in, you ought to have said, ‘ Don’t speak a word to me till I’ve had something to eat ! ’ That’s what I should have said. Do ring the bell—

the little bell on the table. Dubois always waits on me."

Dubois answered the summons, and received orders to bring in tea for Mrs. Thorpe.

"And tell Mrs. Rouse to send up an egg or two, or some ham, or anything nice that she has in the house," added the Countess. "Well, what do you stand there for?—make haste!"

Dubois had certainly stood longer than seemed necessary, as if irresolute what to do; and on quitting the room, she tossed her head in an impertinent manner.

"It is astonishing," said the Countess, when the door was closed, "what little attachment there is in the class of persons who live by hiring themselves out. That Dubois, now:—she has lived with me two years; and whilst I was surrounded with luxuries, she took care to help herself, I know. In those days I frequently made her handsome presents. Directly I suffer a reverse, she lets me see that she has only the most selfish of interests in serving me. Within the last week or two she has been positively insolent. I shall certainly part with Dubois at the first opportunity."

All this was unpleasant for Avice, who could not help contrasting her present reception by her

own sister with that given her by Susan Thorpe, when, nineteen years before, she had entered the bright, cheerful little house at Burnham Crags as its mistress. The shabby-genteel, littered, room showed most unfavourably, too, beside the well-recalled snug parlour, with its comforts and elegancies ; and now, wearied in body and mind, she felt how impossible it would be to yield to any such luxurious ease and tranquil enjoyment as had on that former eventful night stolen over her while she reclined in the easy-chair, with Mrs. Ritson opposite, looking the personification of pleased contentment, and Susan Thorpe, kindly and good-humoured, bustling around her, preparing the tea, and her husband passing to and fro, evidently only anxious for her happiness. Had she never before so fully appreciated the love and the quiet home, now both lost to her ? Perhaps not. Avice heaved a sigh of regret for that later past.

“ Madam Rouse says you must ‘ave tea no more till you pay,” said Dubois, bursting into the room in an excited state. “ *C'est une chose*

“ Well, upon my word !” said the Countess, coolly, “ the impudent woman ! But it does not much matter. Avice, you can lend me two

or three sovereigns, and we will provide tea for ourselves. I will pay you again in a day or so. —Dubois, fetch the tea-kettle here."

Dubois declared that Madame Rouse would not allow the Countess the use of a tea-kettle until her bill was paid. There was no mistake about this determination on the part of Mrs. Rouse, who, perhaps, stood in dread of another penniless boarder in the person of Avice.

"What is the matter with the woman all at once?" asked the Countess, turning to Dubois.

Dubois could not say.

"I think," said Avice, who was greatly distressed, "I think it would be better to pay this bill, or part of it," she added, with a half-frightened recollection of the extravagant habits of which the Countess had boasted. "I brought about thirty pounds with me. Will that sum be of any use?"

"Perhaps it will be as well to pay the bill and have done with it," said the Countess, who did not seem to be really disturbed in the least. "I cannot tell what the amount is: I have not been accustomed to attend to such small matters. Dubois, tell the woman to send her bill up."

Dubois reminded the Countess that the bill had been presented to her that very morning.

"I had forgotten all about it. Look for it, then."

After some searching, Dubois found the bill. It amounted to twenty-three pounds and some odd shillings.

"What a ridiculously small sum!" said the Countess, laughing. "I declare I have ordinarily spent twice as much in a day! Think of the low wretch making a noise about such a sum as that! My dear Avice, you shall pay it by all means, and then we shall have a little quietness. Mind that she receipts the bill, Dubois, and tell her to send the tea directly."

The bill was returned receipted, and the tea quickly followed. Altogether harassed in mind, and sick with long fasting, Avice partook only sparingly of the good things now placed before her. The Countess, on the contrary, made a very hearty meal; and Avice could not help further wondering on what score she had represented herself to be such an invalid, as to be incapable of writing a note. Avice had certainly hurried herself, and allowed herself to be disturbed in mind most unnecessarily; and for some unanalysed reason it did not afford her any pleasure to find her sister, in comparison with herself, as strong as an ox.

Shortly after tea, Mrs. Rouse desired to know if the strange lady could sleep with the Countess, as her house was quite full and the beds all occupied. Her niece slept with herself, and Dubois slept with her servant. The Countess met this difficulty as she seemed to meet most others. She could not be put out of her way. She had been accustomed to sleep alone, and could not put up with a bed-fellow. Mrs. Rouse, who had begun to feel some respect for the new-comer, sent out to inquire for a bed, though the hour was late; and presently one was found at the house of an attorney in an adjoining street. To this final resting-place for the night Avice shortly betook herself, having the untidy servant for a guide, and more unpleasant thoughts by way of company than she had reckoned upon when starting in the morning.

CHAPTER III.

CONTRARY to her expectation, Avice slept well and soundly, and awoke refreshed. She was not quite sure whether the loud, shrill screaming of a child had anything to do with her awakening, and it mattered little, as it was broad daylight, and she was ready to rise. Finding her way to her sister's lodging, she was received by the untidy servant, who handed her over to Dubois. Dubois said that her lady never rose before twelve o'clock, but she had ordered her to serve Madame Thorpe's breakfast in the 'drawing-room. So Avice breakfasted alone, and wondered whether her sister was really sleeping, or was merely inaccessible in the way that fashionable ladies usually are until their toilets are sufficiently complete, or they have in some manner whiled away the hours during which it is inexpedient or vulgar to receive company. Sitting in the room next the Countess's sleeping apart-

ment, she was soon made aware that the latter was awake, by the sound of voices, and the passing to and fro of Dubois. Avice was not unexpectedly chilled and repelled in this quarter ; but she could not avoid feeling that she had either desired or deserved something better than she found. Strange that none with whom she had ever come in contact since Phillip died, would allow her to give vent to the oppressive fulness of feeling that was in her ; that in the interchange of thought none satisfied her ; so that she indeed seemed too much of an alien, in a world peopled with myriads to whom she was akin, yet not one of whom recognised in her the fitness, the eager yearning for closest communion, that to put aside, and throw away, amounted to more than the utter annihilation of one whole life. A vapoury sort of consciousness, comprehending all this, as a shadow indicates some substance, lay upon Avice during the hours that she passed alone, while waiting for her sister's appearance. She was not so fettered by one phase of the life that was in her as to be otherwise inert or idle ; for there was an exuberance of life in Avice that would break out in every available way ; and she wrote a long letter to her daughter ; and made an ac-

quaintance with the few books that lay in her way; and fell into a reverie respecting Walter Osborne and Phillip, (she could not separate the two) that Phillip, and Walter Osborne, and Edward Thorpe, together, would have rejoiced over, if together they could have understood all its import.

In the course of the morning, the Countess de Torres communicated with Avice two or three times through the medium of Dubois. The Countess hoped that she was making herself quite comfortable—the Countess sent a book which she hoped might amuse her—the Countess thought that she would perhaps like to have a walk in the garden that was visible from the windows, and which Mrs. Rouse's lodgers were privileged to enter. Avice's natural good taste in literature had not deteriorated during the direction of her studies by Edward Thorpe, and she did not take to the book, and she did not feel inclined to walk in the garden. The latter suggestion, however, induced her to take a survey of the garden from one of the windows, and she placed her chair so that she could command a view of it. The day was bright and warm for the season, and the well-kept garden was, in itself a pleasant sight to contemplate, especially

to Avice, who, during so many years, had been accustomed to view nature only in its wildest and most barren aspects. And it was interesting to her, who had at no period of her life made acquaintance with such a scene, to watch the individuals collected in the garden, chiefly nursery-maids, with children in their arms, and troops of children, who gambolled about, making the most of their own bright morning, which no cloud had as yet overshadowed. Far away from her, quite inaccessible to her, was that pleasant world lying outside; and yet not farther away or more inaccessible than was that sisterly regard upon which she had reckoned so much, and which those cautiously closed doors on her other hand did not keep from her, because behind them was nothing beyond a bodily presence, in which no soul dwelt for her. Avice was herself surprised that this latest disappointment did not affect her so profoundly as she would have supposed it would have done, if she had contemplated it at a distance; she had forgotten that she had been seasoned to disappointment, that in truth she no longer expected from life the glory, and grace, and rich fulness with which long ago it had been invested by her imagination.

It was nearly one o'clock when the folding doors were fairly opened, allowing room for the entrance of the Countess, whose appearance caused Avice to start with surprise. The Countess noticed the start with a gratified smile. It was a fact that the Countess de Torres profited by dress more than most women do. Her tall, portly figure, the grace and ease of all her movements, and the natural confidence of her manner, all became sumptuous dress, and she was sumptuously dressed now. She was attired in black velvet, relieved at the throat and wrists by the costliest lace, her wrists were also decorated with massive gold bracelets; and to the chain of gold that hung from her neck was suspended a magnificent watch, which she took some pains to exhibit. She wore a head-dress ornamented with scarlet feathers that harmonised well with her still black and glossy hair. Possessing no beauty of face, her countenance, with its decided features, had a distinguished air; and, altogether,—recalling to her mind the Clementina of old—Avice thought she had never seen her sister look so well.

"What a good little thing you are!" said the Countess, stooping, and kissing Avice on the forehead. "I was positively astonished

when I heard of your early arrival this morning ; but I suppose it is a habit with country people to rise early. In cities, only the commonest people do so. But, dear me ! you country people do not make the best use of your wretchedly long days. For instance, what little pains you have taken with your hair this morning ! and it is a pity, for your hair is really beautiful. We must have Dubois look to it. I am sorry to observe that your black dress looks shabby by daylight. In London, dress is everything ; and you really require dress to brighten you up. You must not neglect yourself so far as to disregard outward appearances."

As the Countess said this, looking down upon Avice's slight figure and faded dress with the superior air that sat so imposingly and well upon her, the latter could not so far overcome the poor human nature that was in her as to avoid feeling abashed, humbled, by a sense of the defects of person and of attire that might have become painfully apparent to herself even if the Countess had not so openly commented upon them. Under such circumstances it seemed worse than useless—only an added bitterness—to feel and believe that beneath this unpromising exterior lay hidden rich growths of thought and

feeling, nourished by some inward sunshine that protected them from the chillness and the darkness without ; for this spiritual part of herself that might have become visibly beautiful, had not been wanted or cared for by any with whom Avice had come into contact during the last twenty years. Shrinking before her sister's bold confident gaze, she timidly admitted that, so far as personal appearance went, the contrast between them was apparent enough and great.

“ But it's partly your own fault, you little goose,” said the Countess ; “ there need not be such great difference. I was really astonished to hear that you had brought no luggage with you, only a small carpet-bag, so that you have no change of dress.”

Again, it was useless for Avice to declare, as was the truth, that in her eagerness to behold her sister once more, in her anxiety respecting her as an invalid, she had been incapable of taking thought for her dress ; and it was still more impossible to explain why it was that that small carpet bag comprised her whole stock of provision for a visit that she had hoped would be of some duration. Therefore Avice said nothing ; and the Countess continued to look down upon her, half-pityingly yet impatiently, as

if she considered that her sister's common-place appearance and utter want of the externals that alone command respect from the world were something derogatory to herself.

"Well, we must do the best we can with you," said the Countess, approaching the bell and ringing it. "There is sufficient material in you to be made something of; but dress is a very chief point. I wish to make you look as decent as possible."

Seeing that the Countess was really disturbed about this matter of her appearance, Avice began to feel that she must be culpable: that living so long out of the world, and so much within herself, she had got into habits of personal neglect that were necessarily offensive to those who moved in society and habitually adapted themselves to some certain standard of taste. And yet Avice was no sloven, but on the contrary, constitutionally fastidious and particular so far as cleanliness and neatness went; so much so that at Moorlands she had been found fault with by the Misses Thorpe for what they termed her would-be-fine-lady ways. What had been unfitting for her with them, was unfit for her here. Here she wanted style, ornament. Considering how altogether wearied she was in spirit, Avice bore

these interferences with her outward life well. She was at all times willing to purchase small peace with small sacrifices, and small endeavour; and in this spirit she yielded herself to the Countess de Torres now.

The bell rang by the Countess was answered by the appearance of Dubois.

“ Dubois,” said the Countess, “ I wish you to attend to Mrs. Thorpe’s toilet. You know what may be done, and you must do your best : Avice, go into my dressing-room with Dubois.”

Avice accompanied Dubois into the dressing-room, also a bedroom, which was so littered and untidy, that had she been inclined to be critical in return she might have contrasted it most unfavourably with her own neat bed-chambers of old in the now desolated house at Burnham Crags, or with the scrupulously well-kept sleeping-apartments at Moorlands. But not being inclined to be critical, Avice, at Dubois’s request, took possession of a chair that stood opposite the looking-glass, and wondered within herself whether anything more presentable could be made out of the material at hand.

Dubois, with her more experienced eye, saw at once what might be done. Avice’s very luxuriant hair, wavy and inclined to curl of itself,

one of her best natural ornaments : and Dubois swept the whole rich mass down, and then commenced operations in an artistic manner. By simply wetting the hair in front and passing it across her fingers, she produced at will ringlets that fell with a natural grace not to be approached by art. The back hair she arranged in a knot so carelessly disposed that here and there a curl escaped, moving as Avice moved, falling upon her neck and contrasting with its whiteness. Avice, glancing in the glass now and then, especially when all was finished, felt awed and saddened by some association of the past, connecting her present appearance with what it had been at the time of Phillip's death. Since then until now her hair had never been so carefully arranged according to its natural bent ; her simple black dress (not so faded as the Countess had declared it to be) was just the kind of dress she had worn on the day when she journeyed with Phillip in the coach from Hampton Court ; and rambled with him about the Temple ; and bathed his head as he reclined in that easy chair ; and knelt by his bed while he was dying.

Surveying herself intently, her old self seemed presented to her still more vividly. Her very

delicate complexion and fine skin did not appear to have been deteriorated by time, so that from amidst the mass of dark curls, and the folds of her black dress, her very fair face and white throat and small snowy hands gleamed as the moon gleams when in all its silvery purity and fulness it breaks out amid the bars of a real northern black cloud. She remembered having caught a glimpse of herself in Phillip's looking-glass ; and it was wonderful, considering the lapse of time, to see herself so little changed as it seemed to her now. For the first time she thought—what was the fact—that she looked much younger than she was ; younger in proportion than the Countess de Torres looked with all the aids of art and laborious decoration. The Countess understood this when Avice re-entered the drawing-room ; and though the Countess was too well bred to start, as Avice might have done, or in any other way give honest expression to what she felt ; it was only by an effort she succeeded in declaring her satisfaction without betraying the real chagrin that mingled with her surprise.

“Really,” she said, “Dubois has effected a wonderful improvement in a short time. One certain style suits you, and no other ; and if you

would habitually attend to that you would always look' remarkably well."

The Countess could scarcely help speaking disparagingly of Avice, under the influence of the small appreciation of her altogether, for which there was no help. The natures of the two sisters were essentially different, and the despised sister possessed the advantage in every respect. Avice understood the Countess as the latter might not understand her ; for a spiritual nature can more readily detect the absence of what is really ennobling and true in the heart and mind of another, than your mere worldlings, with the whole power of an inferior nature, can make a guess at the differences inclining them to regard all highest qualities with contempt. The worldling possesses that one great advantage of being more readily understood and met ; and that other immense advantage of being thoroughly satisfied with the world, so long as its good things are within reach. Much to which Avice aspired was not in the world's gift ; and what was in its gift for which she craved was difficult of attainment —sympathy, communion of thought and feeling. This different seeking in the two sisters sundered them completely, because each knew that neither could supply the need of the other.

Avice was quite conscious of being rated as low by the Countess de Torres as she had been by the Misses Thorpe when they exalted Ritson above her, or when, after Ritson's death, they required her to yield altogether to their will. The world is a dreary place when the higher nature comes in contact only with the lower—the higher nature that cannot boast or exalt itself above all humanity in the midst of its failures ; that is readily surprised, disappointed, saddened ; driven back, and kept down by the whirl and din of business and pleasure that go on for ever and triumphantly. Many a poor dead face expresses all this—the surprise, the disappointment, the sadness,—while being lowered into its mother earth.

With regard to Avice and the Countess de Torres, there were two motives that for the present promised to keep them on good outward terms with one another—self-interest and natural affection. The latter, in Avice, would have availed nothing, if, for divers reasons, the Countess had not found that it would be to her own advantage to patronise and countenance her sister. As a girl, she had despised Avice and all her pursuits ; she had despised her father and Phillip, because they weakly encouraged and

admired her (the gentle-hearted father and noble brother!) ; she could not forgive Avice for contracting that low marriage, which now she had not the grace to blush for. Avice ought to have died when she knew that, the alternative must be disgrace to her family—died as Blanche did, and so get out of the way—she who was in the way. This was the Countess's creed, and she was strong in it. It had been a source of continual irritation to her to know, or believe she knew, that with proper management and foresight Avice might have become the wife of Walter Osborne. So she could not help supposing this after a long lapse of years, during which Walter Osborne had not ceased to inquire at intervals most earnestly after the missing girl, respecting whom all her relatives declared that she had eluded their most vigilant inquiries. It was true, that except Lady Otley and Clementina, none knew of her whereabouts ; for these two had kept the matter to themselves, for sufficient reasons of their own. And it was in consequence of these two ceasing to have any interest in common, and of the Countess de Torres falling into embarrassed circumstances, that the truth was declared at last : a large part of the truth—Avice's low marriage, for

instance, which it was necessary to acknowledge in order to account for the determined silence respecting her which the Countess de Torres had maintained. The latter, when brought into personal contact with a strong-natured, straightforward man like Mr. Osborne, was compelled to admit more than she intended ; to blurt out facts that spoke sadly to her disadvantage, and sadly for Avice in another way ; and to bear as well as she might the bluntly expressed disapprobation and contempt that had marked all Walter Osborne's words and manner during their last interview.

This kind of detection and rebuke was not calculated to trouble the Countess de Torres much, or at all for long. Like Lady Otley, she considered Walter Osborne to be little better than a savage. Had he been a man of any refinement, a polished man about town, he would not have been taken with so poor a thing as Avice Desborough was, and continued to be to this day. He was wealthy, however, and above all things, the Countess de Torres coveted a portion of this wealth.

And it seemed to be within her reach. Walter Osborne, who had been so devoted to Phillip — who had so cherished his memory — who had

shewn a desire to be connected with him in every available way—who had been so persevering in his inquiries after Avice—who had made such an exhibition of his ungentlemanly qualities on her account, would, without doubt, make an offer of himself to the widow of that low Mr. Thorpe; and of course Avice, who could accept anybody, would accept him. Here the Countess rested. She had no further misgiving. She believed that Avice having wealth in her hands, would be like having wealth in her own hands. And she was, so far, right; but she was wrong in supposing that Avice, under such circumstances, would be altogether her dupe.

Looking down upon Avice now with much contempt and some bitterness in her heart, the Countess could not help marvelling how any man, even an uncultivated rude brute like Walter Osborne, could prefer such a woman to thousands better every way—to herself, for instance. She would have well liked to establish a personal influence over Walter Osborne; and did not despair of ultimately doing that, notwithstanding all that had passed. Her large, showy person and attractive manners (put on when she liked), had captivated many men; and she knew from

experience that most men look no further than the outside in woman. If, in the end, she could manage the husband and wife together (she had married the two already in her own mind), all this preliminary disagreeableness would have been well borne.

Partly because of the small consideration in which she could not help holding Avice, and partly because she had a horror of such exhibitions of feeling as the latter was in the habit of giving way to, the Countess did not inform her sister that she had already sent a message to Mr. Osborne, informing him of her arrival (and of the fact of her being a widow), and that she expected to see him in the course of the afternoon or evening. If Avice had understood the Countess in minor particulars, as it was impossible for her to do, she would have known that her elaborate toilet portended something, as she was not in the habit of dressing for nothing. Not understanding, and regarding what she saw as an every-day matter, Avice admired her sister's stylish appearance a little, as something suitable to her station; and marvelled at it a little in connection with the poverty of which she had complained; and, y, felt thankful to believe that this poverty

was not of the kind that she herself had apprehended and struggled with years ago. Such poverty as that! How doubly the Countess would have scorned her if she could have read her thoughts!

• Avice, on re-entering the drawing-room, had resumed her seat near the window, from which she had a view of the street as well as of the grounds opposite. It was interesting to her to watch the busy life thus presented to her, not merely because of the novelty of the contemplation, but because her warm heart and vivid imagination were alike ready to go forth and acquire fresh force and life, amid the crowd of human beings, every one of whom inspired her with an earnest interest. In few words, she acknowledged as much to the Countess, who reclined upon a couch in a carefully studied attitude, requested to know if she had any motive in placing herself so near the window, and gazing into the street so absorbingly as she did. In her heart, the Countess laughed long with derisive contempt, and she begged aloud that Avice would not acknowledge so much to any one else.

“It reminds me,” she said, “of what I have heard or read somewhere, about bumpkin country

cousins, who, on coming to London, express as much wonderment at all they see as if they had journeyed from the moon. The people who pass and repass from morning till night are the commonest of people, I assure you ; such people as are met with in swarms everywhere. For my part, it has always struck me as something dreadful that there should be so many persons in the world who cannot be of the slightest use in it."

In her consideration for feelings and opinions, with which she did not pretend to sympathise in the least, Avice withdrew from the window, and placed herself near her sister. It might have occurred to both—it did occur to one of them—that thus left alone together, some difficulties might stand in the way of their further communion, now that the first excitement of their meeting was over, and all the explanation that was possible between them was at an end too. Avice had nothing further to say respecting the past to the Countess de Torres, and she did not wish to receive from the latter any added explanation of her own conduct in that past. She felt no such interest in any of the personages known to her long ago, not in the Otleys, for instance, as could have prompted

inquiries concerning them, or inclined her to listen with any pleasure to voluntarily-given particulars of that kind. Avice had a native pride of her own, and a shuddering recollection of the repulses she had met, and the rough casting off, after her aunt De Burgh's death, that rendered the Otleys as dead to her. The glimpses that the Countess De Torres had already afforded her into her own past life disinclined Avice to search further that way; and though she longed to hear more respecting Walter Osborne, she dreaded to hear more; for, though the Countess had not declared so much to her, she began to apprehend that the latter had only sought him at length in furtherance of some selfish end. Walter Osborne was wealthy, and the Countess acknowledged herself to be in great need. Herself generous to excess, and only coveting wealth for the sake of the noblest uses to which it may be put, and yielding no honour to the possessors of it who act ignobly and selfishly, Avice was yet the most sensitive person in the world about incurring obligations of that lowest kind; and the evident extravagance, and recklessness, and cool effrontery of the Countess de Torres humbled and alarmed her.

The Countess, on her part, very absorbingly

occupied with her person, her dress, and her stock of graceful attitudes, and fully conscious of being in the presence of an inferior, felt very much at her ease. It was not because she was at all at a loss for subjects of conversation that she for some minutes remained silent, toying the while with her jewelled fingers, and adjusting the bracelets on her wrists.

“I believe,” she said at length, with a full measure of the impertinence that is compatible with the highest breeding, and that assumes impossibilities without fear of contradiction, “I believe I have never told you how really ill the Otleys behaved to myself both during Captain Renshaw’s lifetime and since. I have not? I have never given you all the particulars? I had an idea that that was the case. I will tell you now, in order that you may understand you have not been worse treated than myself. If you have some reason to complain, I have still greater reason.”

“I have never complained of the Otleys,” said Avice, quietly. “I have never felt a wish to speak of them in any way.”

“Oh! you quite mistake,” said the Countess, with a little authoritative wave of her hand. “You *do* complain in your heart: you believe

yourself to have been hardly treated—I know that 'I have been hardly treated—by these persons. You shall hear."

And the Countess entered into a long account of her treatment by the Otleys. Partly because of her contempt for the supposed simplicity of Avice, and partly because of the coarseness of her own nature, she made half admissions that did not tell to her advantage, and some of which Avice was able to comprehend to the full. For instance, that, to begin with, she had been quite ready to sacrifice both her sisters out of deference to Lady Otley, and in order to secure the latter's good will. Having received large promises in return for some sacrifices (so the Countess worded her meaning, whatever it might be), she went confidently to India with her husband, who had been slightly promoted, and who had received the fullest assurance that the patronage of the family would continue to be exerted on his behalf. Once in India, however, the Otleys chose to forget not only their promises but the very existence of her husband and herself. Connections of the family in India gave them the cut direct; letters of appeal and remonstrance remained unanswered. In the midst of his disappointment, the Captain chose to be unjust.

He declared that his wife had deceived him—that he had been altogether entrapped and imposed upon. His wife, naturally indignant at such a charge, recriminated, and the two remained on the worst of terms, until at length it was no longer possible for them to live together. The Countess acknowledged that she was separated from this first husband for some years previous to his death, during which she lived upon her own resources. What these resources were, respecting which she spoke with much confidence, was not clear. Shortly after her husband's death she returned to Europe. She fixed her residence in Paris, and while there encountered many difficulties. At a time of great distress she made another appeal to the Otleys, which was never replied to. She again trusted to her own resources, and eventually met with the Count De Torres, a dashing young noble, very dissipated and not over rich, who had met Lord Otley during a tour, and was delighted to make the acquaintance of Lord Otley's cousin. Shortly afterwards he was delighted to make her an offer of his hand, which she accepted; and Lord Otley, visiting Paris on his return to England, and being a fool, as he had said, was delighted to resume his

acquaintance with the Count, and to congratulate his cousin, and attend her brilliant assemblies, and be made much of, as the really important personage he felt himself to be. He was even content to lose a little money to the Count at play. The Countess de Torres dwelt much upon her own disinterestedness and magnanimity at this period of her life. She had received Otley with open arms, notwithstanding his former unkindness, and neglect, and breaches of faith. She had not allowed him to suppose that she cherished the least resentment for conduct that would not have been so readily overlooked by others. She had exerted herself to the utmost, in order to make his stay in Paris every way agreeable to him. Yet, on his return to England, he resumed his old attitude, and completely cut both the Count de Torres and herself. It was even reported on good authority that he had been known to speak disparagingly of both; and certainly he did not write to them, as he had promised to do, and he did not answer letters addressed to him by them. Under these circumstances, the second husband of the Countess de Torres proved himself to be as ungrateful and unjust as the first. He proved himself to have been mercenary. He accused

his wife of having deceived him ; and then, for the first time, his wife understood that he had married her on the strength of her connection with the Otleys. How was she to have known that ? Another series of storms—another separation—and the Countess was again thrown upon her own resources. These seemed to have failed her only after a lapse of years ; and with what object she had finally returned to England did not appear to Avice, except that she acknowledged to have hoped, notwithstanding all that had passed, that Otley, or some one of the family, would see the propriety of acknowledging her, or at least helping her necessities. Neither Lord Otley nor any belonging to him saw anything of the kind ; and at length it might be fairly considered that this great connection was never likely to be of any real service to her.

Avice, at the conclusion of this catalogue of events and grievances, wondered more than ever at the perfect coolness and readiness with which the Countess de Torres acknowledged so much that told every way against herself. Avice remained silent, oppressed by emotions of surprise, sorrow, shame. The Countess, on the contrary, who had glossed over and concealed so much, who was not aware of having done more than

made out a good case for herself, which she intended to answer a purpose, interpreted Avice's silence in her own way, and went on—

“I see you are shocked, as I expected you would be. I have been every way sacrificed by the unnatural conduct of my uncle's family. I am not in the habit of complaining, however, and I have spoken out now only that you might understand I have been even worse treated by them than yourself. You must acknowledge that you have not equal ground of complaint against the Otleys.”

“You must allow me to say for myself,” said Avice, her slight frame trembling with indignation, “that I have at all times possessed too much independence of spirit to have at any time, or under any circumstances, brought upon myself the kind of affronts of which you complain. I thank God that I have been preserved from having any intercourse with the Otleys.”

“Stop! stop! that sounds unchristianlike. My chief object in saying what I have said was, to place myself in a position in which I could set you an example of forgetting and forgiving. I forgive these people; I consider it my duty to do so. For instance, if to-morrow I found myself in circumstances that would render it politic

on the part of the Otleys to court my society, I should certainly meet their advances, and consider it right to do so. There are certain rules of propriety which should not be outraged ; if we outrage them, it must be to our own disadvantage."

"Especially if we outrage them to the end of the chapter," said Avice.

"Of course," assented the Countess, whose small intellect helped her to overlook Avice's real meaning, "I assure you that in England, where money is so plentiful, and where it is so readily procured by the lower classes—being a sort of great work-shop, as you may have heard—wealth alone is not available as an introduction to the first society, as it is on the Continent and elsewhere. In England, high birth and connections are indispensable ; and for this reason we cannot afford to give the Otleys up. We cannot take the highest position without their help ; and in London nothing short of the very highest position is worth anything. You comprehend my meaning, I am sure."

"I believe I do," said Avice. "You must allow me to add, that your views are not my views. I have no wish to enter the first society, which is only to be approached through the

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Otleys. I can take my own highest position without their help ; and I have lived long enough to understand that my own respect is something better than the toleration of others."

" My dear Avice," said the Countess, " you talk like a provincial. Indeed, you have quite acquired a provincial accent in speaking. You are not aware of it, I dare say ; but that is the fact. Well, we may drop the whole subject at present : circumstances will alter your views. I declare it is nearly three o'clock," she continued, glancing at her superb watch ; " and, perhaps, you are used to dining early. I generally take lunch at two. Be good enough to ring the bell."

Dubois, on making her appearance, was ordered to prepare lunch in the bed-room, the Countess particularly wishing that the drawing-room should not be disarranged. Her care in this respect, coupled with her evident watchfulness and anxiety, whenever a knock was heard at the street-door, led Avice to suppose that the Countess was expecting a visitor. Could she be expecting Walter Osborne ? was her next thought ; and she herself began to listen, and her heart beat more quickly at every summons from without. She regretted that the meeting was to take place in the presence of the Countess,

whose surmises had already offended her, and whose want of delicate feeling was likely enough to shock and wound her further before the interview was over. But with her whole heart, that now went forth to meet, she longed to behold him—to clasp the friendly hands that had been so busily and tenderly employed about Phillip—to gaze into the earnest eyes that had watched him so anxiously—to hear the kind voice, that had addressed to him words never forgotten by her. It was almost like waiting to see Phillip. The world was no longer a desert to her, because it contained this true friend. And there was no doubt in her expectation, for Avice could not believe that a warm and noble heart might undergo change.

She sat silently, recalling all the particulars of the sad scene in which they two had last met. It seemed to her only yesterday, so vivid was her recollection. She recalled Walter Osborne's appearance as it was then, and felt sure that she should be able to recognize him anywhere, whatever outward change might have taken place. She began to feel impatient for his arrival—to fear that she had been too sanguine, and that she might not see him yet. The Countess did not disturb her; for the Countess

who had just received the *Morning Post*, was absorbed with the fashionable news. Avice was wishing to hear another peal from the knocker, when Dubois opened the drawing-room door, and informed the Countess that Mr. Osborne waited to see her.

No knock seemed to have announced his arrival, but here he was. The Countess desired that he might be shown up stairs, quietly disposed of her paper, and re-arranged her attitude to her perfect satisfaction. Avice started from her chair and walked to the window. She could not tell for what reason, for when the Countess asked her she was silent.

“Pray do not disgrace yourself and me by this rustic manner,” said the Countess. “Why, you absurd little thing, you are as white as a ghost! I ought to have prepared you, I see. Do sit down and try to behave decently.”

Avice returned to her chair, but did not sit down. It was an easy-chair, and she had unconsciously placed herself at the back of it, and stood there with her hands resting upon the leather cover. It was exactly the position in which Walter Osborne had seen her at first. Phillip only was wanting, and the vacant chair seemed to tell the whole history of the past.

Mr. Osborne entered the room and glanced eagerly forward. He was no rustic ; but he contrived to disgrace himself, by entirely overlooking the Countess de Torres. His friend's sister, looking so like her well-remembered former self—the same slight figure, simply clad in black—the same fair, pale face, only much paler, half shaded by a profusion of dark, curling hair—the same small, white hands, lying idly now, yet so suggestive where they lay of the sad uses to which they had been put long ago—and that empty chair—impressed him suddenly in a way and to a degree that almost caused him to stagger. Avice recovered herself in the instant during which she witnessed and comprehended his emotion ; and she moved quickly towards him, holding out both hands.

“ My friend !—dear Phillip’s friend !” was all she could say. Then came a burst of uncontrollable tears—the unshed tears that had been freezing about her heart during half a life-time !

“ Miss Desborough !—Avice !” he exclaimed, warmly grasping both the hands he had taken. “ My God ! what a recalling of the past all this is ! Lean on me ! We have wept together before now !”

He passed one arm round her waist, still

keeping her hand clasped in his. All the pent-up griefs of her life seemed to burst from Avice at once—her slight frame shook with convulsive sobs, that might not be stayed—her heart ached, as a hand that has been benumbed with frost aches under the influence of the warmth that restores its life. Forgetting the Countess de Torres—forgetting everything save the bitterness of the past, and the one presence that at the instant formed all the world for her, Avice, with her head reclined helplessly on Walter Osborne's shoulder, suffered him to soothe her with such tender words as he might have used to soothe a child.

The Countess de Torres was immensely shocked at what she considered to be quite improper.

“This is what is called sentiment, I suppose,” she said within herself—“something quite fit for the stage, but how very dreadful in actual life!”

“My dear Avice,” she continued aloud, “are you at all aware what you are about? You are troubling Mr. Osborne very much, I am sure. Let me beg of you to recollect yourself.”

Avice lifted her tearful face, still sobbing, but more quietly. Other tears, that fell slowly and heavily, had mingled with her own; and now

Walter Osborne dashed his hand across his eyes.

“Your sister,” he said, “has just found a brother in place of the brother she lost. This, I trust, will be happiness for both of us; for me certainly; and surely for her, after suffering so much—God only knows how much! Dear Avice! speak to me always as you would have spoken to Phillip!”

“I do—I will,” said Avice, gently striving to release herself from the supporting arm, while an unwonted colour suffused her whole face. “I feel very happy now.”

In a few minutes Avice was again seated in the easy chair—with Walter Osborne by her side now, still clasping her hand in his.

What a change had passed over that room for her in an instant of time! How dreary and void it had seemed to her a little while ago, and how full of life and happiness it was now! It was as if indeed the black cloud of her many griefs had been broken up at length, dissolving away in heavy but refreshing showers, and leaving free passage for the sunbeams, with their warmth and light; she was so cheered, so happy, so grateful. Every tried pulse of her heart, every instinct of her nature, assured her that she had in-

deed found a brother in Walter Osborne. He was at once Phillip and himself. The two were inseparable in her mind, in her heart, and the result of the combination was an inexpressible joy, that irradiated her whole being. It was a complete restoration of that edifice, her proper self, that had been undermined, and broken away and neglected, and left to the mercy of bleak winds, in a solitude where only rank weeds flourished. And in her proper self, as God had originally made her, Avice was a glorious creature; alive to all the noblenesses of life; gentle and loving; earnest and true. As she sat now, having on her face the rich expression brought out by the sudden flowing forth of her best feelings, and brightening of her highest thoughts, even the Countess could not help thinking that her sister possessed some beauty. And the Countess considered it quite necessary to apologise for her sister's weakness and utter want of decorum. .

“ I must acknowledge,” she said, “ that you have taken my sister by surprise. I was not sure that we should see you to-day, and it did not occur to me to say that you might possibly call. Of course I could not suppose that Avice would be so far overpowered by the mere recol-

lection of an event that occurred so long ago. Good breeding and religion (the two always go hand-in-hand) alike teach us that it is decidedly wrong to encourage our feelings of any kind until they get beyond our control. Avice is sadly in need of a little discipline, and I see I must be at the trouble of instructing her."

"In religion, perhaps?—or what else was it you said?" asked Mr. Osborne, regarding the Countess with a peculiarly grim smile on his swarthy visage. "Depend upon it the idea is altogether a mistake. Avice has grown upward to God and nature, and her teachers may not be interfered with. For my part I would rather sit at her feet and learn. How wonderfully like Phillip, you have become!" he continued, regarding Avice with a look of mingled tenderness and regret; "and what a happiness it is simply to look on you as I do now! I cannot tell you how I have longed that this hour might come!"

"Certainly Avice has grown remarkably like Phillip, who was very handsome," said the Countess. "I was thinking so just now. When Avice looks happy she is most like Phillip, who generally had a joyous expression on his face; for what reason I never could tell, for his prospects were dark enough, poor fellow."

"His was a beautiful soul, and the peace of God dwells with such," said Mr. Osborne. "That better part of my friend is restored to me, I know. But I do not forgive those who have separated so long what God meant should keep together. Much desolation of heart and life, many miserable errors, would have been spared me if I had been allowed to fulfil the trusts reposed in me by Phillip. Before God I charge all this—and how much more I have yet to learn—upon those who believe *that religion always goes hand-in-hand with good breeding; that it is decidedly wrong to encourage our feelings until they get beyond our control*—as in that case they may sometimes compel us to do what is just and right; and who in order to avoid the latter error deem it best not to feel at all."

The strong, rugged, outspoken man! Avice looked at him as he said this, in the deepest tones of his powerful voice; his dark eyes fairly striking fire; his whole countenance flashing with the indignation only tamely expressed by his words. She who had hitherto seen in him only a gentleness that was almost womanly, did not feel surprised at this outburst, or repelled by it; it was so evidently the honest utterance of an energetic, unshackled spirit, bold and strong enough to

grasp, and denounce, and beat down what it would and should ; the mood became him so well ; he was so certainly formed for it, or it for him, with his powerful frame, his fine, swart, expressive countenance ; his many-toned voice ; his manifestation altogether of iron strength and will ; it was so like himself as Phillip had described him to her ; that part of himself hidden from her until now, and now demonstrating to her the noble completeness of his character. She admired the entire soul and nature that could be at once so gentle and so stern ; so abounding in love, and so overwhelming in scorn, and throughout all remaining so true to the finest instincts, human and divine. Her heart glowed and dilated with its new-born pride in this friend and brother, by whose side she seemed at length to have found her true place ; even while feeling pained for her sister ; pained also, deeply and strangely, for herself. What was that trust reposed in him by Phillip which he had so desired to fulfil ? Phillip had said to herself that he wished this friend to become his brother indeed ; and in his delirium he had repeatedly adjured Walter Osborne to fulfil this one wish of his heart. Was this the trust the latter spoke of when he said its fulfilment would have brightened his own life ? when

he denounced as unforgiven those who had severed the power from the strong will in him? And if so, what of her own regrets?—and how was she in future to deal with this nature that had no disguises; with this great, disappointed, indignant heart, whose hope had died out? Beware, Avice! The word was almost on her lips—it was in her heart. Beware!

Quite composed; altogether unmoved in countenance or spirit; preserving her graceful attitude with the most delightful ease in the world, the Countess sat in the presence of these disturbed hearts, these natures both wonderfully strong in their way, conscious of little except that Mr. Osborne was an unmannerly bear, sufficiently rude and uncultivated to be managed by superior tact.

“It has often struck me,” she said (it is a mark of good breeding to make use of the past tense, when the use of it amounts to a lie), “that Avice was very thoughtless, very reprehensible, indeed, in not communicating with you above all others; she knew better than any one what a friend you had been to Phillip. It was like a want of gratitude, though she was not ungrateful, I dare say. I never could understand from her why she acted as she did.”

Avice could not resist casting a look of surprise upon her sister. The subject had not been mentioned during the only brief intercourse they had held together for the last nineteen years. Mr. Osborne understood the Countess's speech and Avice's look to the full.

"Next to dirty work," he said, "I have a dislike to dreary work—such work as accomplishes nothing when it is done. You don't understand, you say; you never tried to understand, in fact; you don't care to understand now. This is the position: I may spare my breath or speak, as I choose. Well, I choose to say this: your sister did communicate with me, in the only way that an unprotected and delicate-minded young girl could communicate with me at that time. Your letter to me, Avice (I possess it yet), so expressive of gratitude, so filled with noble and beautiful thoughts, helped to drive me almost mad when I feared that I must lose you. I loved you all the more for the womanly reserve, the independence of spirit, that kept you out of my reach. I recognised all Phillip's nature in you: his noble pride, his fervent feeling, his delicate sensitiveness. I knew how much a nature like yours must suffer if left to battle with the world

alone—and you were so left. I knew how Phillip would have suffered if he could have understood what was to be—what was. And oh, my God! Avice, *I* suffered. I have not yet learned what your trial has been; hard enough, I am sure, or the sore heart would have been healed—as it is not. I am your brother now, and some day you will tell me all."

Avice returned the pressure of his hand. He could not have given her better assurance of his brotherly regard than he did now, by avoiding all allusion to her own past in the presence that overshadowed both. She would not have had him feel less intensely than he did; for nothing short of his full comprehension of the suffering of the past, of his overflowing sympathy, could have been worthily, or at all, admitted to the confidence of one whose trial had been so great: but she did wish that he would speak less strongly, though she had no reason to believe that the Countess would be moved by what he said in the least.

And in truth the Countess, fenced about by her own conscious superiority, preserved her composure of mind and mien wonderfully. She would not have allowed herself to be offended

by Walter Osborne for the world; she was bent upon making herself agreeable to him. It was not her fault that she adopted the very worst method for accomplishing her end.

"I see in the paper," she said, "that young Lady Otley had a very grand party the other night. Really the guests were very distinguished. I suppose you were there, of course?"

Mr. Osborne started from his chair, walked across the room and back, and again took Avice's hand. It seemed quite impossible for him to enter into conversation with the Countess.

"Do *you*," he said, addressing Avice, "knowing what you do of the Otleys—knowing that I am acquainted with all their conduct to Phillip and yourself—do *you* believe me to be so tame, and base, and despicable of nature altogether, as to have kept up any intercourse of this kind with the Otleys? No! I am sure not. God pardon the souls that bring our divinest attributes into contempt, for I cannot! I have at intervals, during all these years, corresponded with Lady Otley by letter, in order to ascertain if anything had been heard of you; but beyond that, I have had no intercourse with any of the race. I have just learned," he continued, glancing indignantly towards the

Countess, "what I suspected all along, that Lady Otley as well as some others might have supplied me with your address if they had liked. By-the-bye, Avice, give me that address, though it is no longer of any use. I cannot get rid of the old craving to have it in my possession."

With a trembling hand, Avice wrote in a leaf of his pocket-book her address in full, as it had appeared on the letter she had received from the Countess. Tremblingly she watched his face as he read it. He changed colour.

"Good God!" he exclaimed, "Moorlands—Thorpe! Why, you have been living all this time near Staunton Court?"

"Yes."

"How very singular!" exclaimed the Countess, who recollects that this was the name of Mr. Osborne's seat in Yorkshire.

"And you would sometimes hear of me? Oh, Avice! this was not fair; you should have written to me."

"What I have said all along," remarked the Countess.

"I cannot enter into explanations just now," said Avice; "when I do, you will see that I could not act otherwise than I have done.

During all those years, never ceasing to think of you, to bless you for your goodness to Phillip and myself, your name never once passed my lips ; none knew that I had ever seen or before heard of you. During all those years I never once uttered Phillip's name, or Blanche's, or my father's, or my aunt De Burgh's—never ! unless, while rambling amidst the Burnham Crags alone in the early morning, or long after nightfall, the beloved names unconsciously escaped my lips aloud. I have none to blame because this was so ; none with whom I have been connected since I saw you. I entered voluntarily upon the life I have led ; and I now believe that much wisdom as well as kindness dictated my course for me."

"Necessary indeed and inevitable was that tempest of feeling just now !" said Mr. Osborne, looking in her face anxiously and pityingly. " You compel me to wonder. During those blank years of silence, your heart filled up with its unuttered love, your memory burdened with the grief and wrong that none might share, how was it you did not go mad ?"

"Perhaps I have no reason to boast of having borne up well," said Ávice. " I always missed the past. At times, I think, I have scarcely

been quite sane.. I wish to believe this: I need such an excuse, when I think sometimes that I might have performed the duties that devolved upon me better than I did."

"How very shocking!" exclaimed the Countess. "Really you should not speak in that way: it is positively wicked!"

"The whole amount of wickedness to be deplored here ought to draw down some signal vengeance," said Mr. Osborne, sternly. "I think I understand something of this. I recollect Thorpe, of Moorlands: he was a man when I was a boy—a rabid radical. What a husband for you! It is too monstrous! I cannot comprehend it."

"Yet it is to be comprehended," said Avice. "You never knew this kind-hearted and really excellent man. From what fate his sympathy and benevolence saved me I cannot tell; but I do know, that in the quiet home he provided for me he did all in his power to promote my happiness. He was a son to Ritson, whose eyes he closed—Ritson, who protected Blanche and myself as long as she could. I have need to bless him so long as I live."

"Then may God bless him—Amen!" said Mr. Osborne.

"Really then, Ritson lived with you after you were married?" said the Countess, elevating her eyebrows. "I forgot to inquire about Ritson."

"It is little more than seven years since she died," said Avice, quietly.

"How very remarkable!" said the Countess, with difficulty suppressing an inclination to yawn.

Mr. Osborne fidgetted in his chair. He rose up and took a few turns about the room, and sat down again. The presence of such a woman as the Countess was an indescribable oppression to him, and he was not accustomed to put up with nuisances of the kind. He heartily wished that he could annihilate her; and he would have done that without the slightest compunction, if it had been possible. He prayed Heaven to give her the grace to hold her tongue.

"I understand that you have a daughter," he continued, "and I thank God for that. You will be able to live again in her: her sympathy and affection will recompense you for much of the past; you will have the happiness of knowing that no such trial as that through which you have passed can ever reach her. Oh! I foresee much joy for you yet."

"No such trial as mine! Oh, no!" said Avice.

Her thoughts went sadly back over the whole life of her child. From the nature so alien to her own, she expected nothing. The character that was growing upon young Lydia, under the influence of her aunts, threatened to widen the distance between them, and this was a subject on which Avice must remain dumb. God alone might know how frequently still, though hopelessly now, her heart sent forth the wild cry that had rushed from her lips long ago, when only the silent sky above and the cold grey rocks around were witnesses—"My child! my child! why will you not turn to me!" Here also Avice knew that she was alone.

But Mr. Osborne held fast by his own ideas on this subject: he never let them go: they had reference to all he said and did. He rejoiced to think how greatly Avice might yet be gratified by means of her daughter.

"You remember Mr. Vernon," he said, "your aunt's constant lover of perhaps half a century? You must have seen him at Hampton Court?"

Avice said she remembered him.

"He is still living, and nearly eighteen years ago he purchased Stanley Place. You are aware that he is rich; and I assure you that he has

restored the old mansion and the grounds in exquisite taste. He and I have always been good friends."

"Ah how much I should like to see Stanley Place once more!" said Avice, clasping her hands together.

"Would you?" said Mr. Osborne, his whole countenance brightening in the beautiful way that it could. "But of course you would like to see it—what a foolish question I put! There your father lies buried—there lie many of your race—not to mention that gallant crusader by whose side, according to Phillip's account, it was your desire to rest after death. Ah! I recollect all that Phillip told me about his favourite sister! Well, you *shall* see Stanley Place once more: I hope to have the great happiness of taking you there. No more welcome guest to Mr. Vernon could enter its walls."

"I wonder who the old gentleman will leave his money to?" said the Countess. "There was certainly some talk of his being attached to my Aunt de Burgh, but I don't understand attachments of that kind. So far, I am sure, he has never shown any consideration for those connected with her."

Not as far as the Countess was concerned.

Mr. Osborne knew that very well. He turned from her with a grimace, and again addressed Avice.

“I believe he was a few years younger than your aunt. He is now ninety-seven, and is still capable of attending to his own affairs. He resides altogether at Stanley Place, but frequently makes visits to London. He was in London only a week or two ago, and I saw him; for he always visits me when he comes here. I assure you that he has not forgotten your Aunt de Burgh. He even remembers that you were always a favourite with her. Your entire disappearance during so many years has been a real trouble to him. It is a fact that he will be delighted to see you, Avice.”

“The kind old man!” said Avice, earnestly, “how good of him to think of me! And yet how natural, too, thinking of Aunt de Burgh as he did and does! When I was quite a young girl, before I went to live altogether at Hampton Court, I heard speak of his long attachment to my aunt, who was a noble woman (so truly noble!—do you at all understand how many excellent qualities met in her?); and it struck me then that there was something especially beautiful in this enduring love, that outlived all

the common inducements of time, and flourished on for eternity, as all true love should—and does. It is indeed a pleasure to me to believe that I may see him again."

"That pleasure is in store for you and for him," said Mr. Osborne, looking admiringly in her glowing face. "As early as possible we must pay a visit to Stanley Place. When I say *we*, I mean the Countess will—should—must—accompany us."

He stopped abruptly, looking annoyed. He had been compelled to say what was disagreeable to him to say. The Countess declared that she should be delighted to visit Mr. Vernon.

"Before going to Stanley Place, however, there is one other spot to visit—more than one. Promise to dine with me to-morrow, and I will fetch you—both of you," he added, getting the latter words out with a jerk.

Avice promised for herself, her eyes suddenly filling with tears.

"O thank you," said the Countess, "that will be very pleasant indeed."

But the Countess was beginning to feel more uncomfortable than she had supposed could be possible. It wounded her woman's vanity to see that she had not made the slightest impres-

sion of an agreeable kind upon Mr. Osborne, though she had never bestowed more pains about her outward appearance. It surprised and annoyed her to be thus altogether overlooked in the presence of so personally inferior an individual as Avice ; and it was not at all plain to her why Avice should be considered to be more interested in Stanley Place, and in whatever related to Phillip, than herself. Then Mr. Osborne was so demonstrative in his attentions to Avice, so tender in his speech and manner, that the contrast of his demeanour towards herself was forced upon her every moment. She considered that he was too absurdly lover-like in the presence of a third person, and on such short notice. The Countess, indeed, was shocked at the impropriety of his whole manner, and astonished at Avice for encouraging it as she did. Finally, she hoped that Mr. Osborne would not stop to dinner, though she intended to ask him, and did so at once:

Mr. Osborne accepted the invitation ; he said he had intended to invite himself. He had so much to say to his new-found sister ; he was so anxious to make fresh arrangements for her comfort. He disapproved of her remaining where she was, and as the Countess's visitor.

The Countess had better become her visitor, it would be to the advantage of both. He would look out for a residence suited to the altered circumstances of Mrs. Thorpe, who must henceforward command consideration through her position.

As he said all this in his assured way, evidently taking a pride and pleasure in what he said, Avice felt surprised and troubled. She could not consent to be indebted to Mr. Osborne to the extent that he seemed to contemplate; it pained her to believe he supposed that she could.

"You are forgetting, my friend," she said, "that my own means are very limited. I cannot consent to adopt a style beyond my means; and, indeed, I am very comfortable here."

"You are *not* comfortable," said Mr. Osborne, positively. "You fancy you are, I dare-say. You are accustomed to making the best of everything—to making sacrifices; you have grown into a habit of thinking little of yourself, and you have been encouraged in the habit on every side, I suspect. It is time that the tables were turned. You must trust me altogether, or not at all, Avice. I stand in Phillip's place;

can you not confide in me to the full as you would have confided in him?"

"Indeed, indeed I can," said Avice, placing her hand on his arm, "but"—

"Well, what of the obstacle—the objection? If I conceive it to be my duty, if I feel that it will conduce to my happiness as well as hers to surround my sister with the elegancies and luxuries becoming her birth and prospects, who shall dispute my right? not you, Avice. But I am only imagining a case now. My chief duty at present is to inform you that you are heiress to considerable wealth. I am myself sole executor under the will that bequeaths you this wealth. If to-morrow you want fifty thousand pounds, it is ready for you; and if to-morrow you spent every penny of that sum, you would still be rich. So you see it is not in my power to offer you more than the small services that you would accept at the hands of a stranger. I am almost sorry that it is so, Avice."

"And this is true?" said Avice, looking in his face, her own white as the whitest marble. "Oh, if this had happened long ago! if Phillip had only lived!"

Still looking to the past! thought Mr. Osborne. It would have pleased him if her first

emotion had been exultation on her daughter's account ; but such exultation never came. The Countess, who had greedily drank in all Mr. Osborne's words, conceived a sudden respect for and admiration of her sister.

" It is true as you say, Mr. Osborne," she said, " that my sister's birth entitles her to occupy the very highest position—and Avice is quite capable of adorning such a position. There is a natural quiet grace about her that will shew to advantage in the most polished circles ; and I remember that when quite a girl, she had great taste for whatever was costly and splendid. My dear sister, I congratulate you with all my heart—may you live long to enjoy your good fortune ! "

The Countess was moved to the extent of forgetting her attitudes. She rose up, threw her arms round her sister's neck, and kissed her ; and then seated herself, as anybody else might have done, eager to hear what further might be said on this very interesting subject.

Avice received her sister's embrace and congratulations very meekly outwardly ; very sadly in her heart, that understood all their worth. The first effect of what the Countess termed her good fortune was to oppress her

very greatly, as if the assurance fell upon her at once, that for any purpose of happiness, it came too late. The day was gone by—the hearts were cold and dead in which, and for whom she could have rejoiced exceedingly. Her own subdued spirit and disappointed heart were not to be cheered or recompensed by any amount of worldly riches, any amount of such service and love as riches could buy. As it was with the Countess, it probably would be with Lydia and the Misses Thorpe. Each and all might discover in her qualities deserving respect and affection ; each and all might defer to her and become bound to her through the medium of services of which she would be lavish enough ; but such love as there was for her, was like dead ashes, with which her path must evermore be strewn. It even seemed to her that this sudden accession of wealth had broken the charm of her happy confidence in, and reliance on Mr. Osborne. She had not altogether shrank from the idea of owing obligation of many kinds to him ; his perfect brotherly love seemed to demand that she should be so indebted ; and her heart was prepared to expand with delight at every fresh proof of his devotion to her interests and her happiness. This entire

independence of one kind seemed to put her apart from him while as yet she needed the stay of his strong, earnest nature ; of his unquestionable regard, of his generous care for her. She might now never know the happiness of owing everything to him. She did not say this to herself—she was not even aware that she felt it ; yet this was the thought that more than any other lay upon her soul with a leaden weight.

“ I think you are very incurious,” said Mr. Osborne, bending down to look in Avice’s face, and pained by her evident abstraction. “ You have not yet inquired who it is that has had such thought for you.”

Avice started. Her spirit had lost its spring ; her heart throbbed with pain only.

“ I am quite dying to know, and Avice is, I am sure,” said the Countess. “ Do tell us all about it at once.”

“ There are difficulties in the way of doing that,” said Mr. Osborne. “ Be sure, Avice, that your friend was something akin to yourself. I cannot say more just now, but I think that will content you.”

“ I am content,” said Avice.

So the Countess was compelled to be content.

If akin to Avice, this unknown benefactor must also be akin to herself, yet here was Mr. Osborne again particularising Avice, and accounting herself as nothing. She wearied herself with vain imaginings as to whom it could be ; and came to the conclusion that he was a fool for his pains. How incomprehensible it was that so poor a thing as Avice should thus enter into the consideration of even wealthy persons ! Avice, who was so little to look at, who had no style, no spirit, who was not capable of appreciating the benefits heaped upon her ! With much bitterness in her heart, much envy, hatred, and malice, the Countess found it easy enough to preserve a pleasant exterior for her guests.

Mr. Osborne, with his experienced eye, and expansive thought, and large heart, saw at once that this acquisition of wealth amounted to little with Avice. She had been starved out, he saw, but not for lack of money. What Phillip had said of her years ago ; what he had seen of her himself years ago ; what he saw now ; what he understood of her whole sorrowful history, enabled him to comprehend that her inner desolate life, and not her outward circumstances, needed ministering to. To know this and to act upon the knowledge was the same thing with him. Into

such a work as this he could throw his whole nature, heart and soul, and he did—without any effort ; for Phillip's sister was inexpressibly dear to him for Phillip's sake—for her own sake. And there was a charm in the work to a solitary man, whose own life had been desolated to begin with.

And so it inevitably happened that before dinner was over, Avice almost forgot that she had been saddened anew ; and before the evening came to a close, was made to marvel at her own excess of happiness. Mr. Osborne had conversed with rare eloquence on subjects that interested her greatly ; he had repeated with exquisite feeling and taste whole poems and passages of poetry which he might have selected purposely, they were so familiar to her as part of the glorious world of imagination, and intense feeling, and beautiful thought, in which she and Phillip had revelled together, in the early, happy days. The atmosphere of those days seemed to be brought about her in this way. And with it came back to her her own gorgeous poetic dreams ; her faith in the rich fulness of life ; her enthusiastic reverence for all that was ennobling and beautiful in the past ; her old home love ; her deep and pervading love for one object. It

seemed so natural to rest her heart upon Walter Osborne ; it was not transferring her heart from Phillip to him, but through him perpetuating its warm interest in Phillip.

The Countess bore this further infliction very well. Seeing that Mr. Osborne was alone aware of Avice's presence ; that he thought of and ministered to her only ; and that Avice was quite as absorbed in himself as he could wish ; she reclined on the couch perfectly at her ease, and employed herself with speculating on the possible advantages that would result to her from her sister's altered circumstances. The result of her cogitations was very satisfactory ; and when the one unmistakeable dreamer was at length roused, the Countess welcomed her to the world of realities with the pleasantest of smiles.

Avice was further roused by the entrance of Dubois, who came to inform her that the attorney's servant had called by appointment, for the purpose of escorting her to her lodging-place for the night. It was half-past nine, the time she had herself fixed upon. The Countess was much annoyed at this arrangement with respect to Avice's accommodation becoming known to Mr. Osborne, not being aware Mr. Osborne had already heard all about it from Dubois. For

Dubois who had during many years past been in the habit of occasionally listening at keyholes, and who had heard enough of Mr. Osborne's conference with her mistress to convince her that the latter was held in very slight estimation in comparison with the sister respecting whom he inquired ; who moreover was heartily weary of her service with the Countess, and much troubled on the score of a long unpaid arrear of wages ; had seen fit to communicate with Mr. Osborne on his arrival that day ; so that he was acquainted with all that had taken place, including the fact of Avice having been compelled to pay Mrs. Rouse's bill before any refreshment could be procured for her, exhausted and tired as she was. Dubois was needlessly eloquent on the subjects of her mistress's selfishness, and the sweetness and obligingness of Madame Thorpe ; for her hearer understood well the different characters of the two sisters ; and he was quite prepared to feel and to act as he had done. .

The Countess now protested that there was not the slightest necessity for Avice to sleep out of the house. She had felt that on the previous night, but it was not quite agreeable to Avice to sleep with her ; she would give up her own bed to Avice with great pleasure ; she was not at all

particular herself ; she could sleep on the sofa ; anywhere.

Avice was much surprised at these declarations —Mr. Osborne was not. Avice quietly requested that the present arrangement might not be interfered with ; Mr. Osborne declared that it must not be interfered with ; and as anxiously and tenderly as if he had indeed been Phillip's self, he folded Avice's cloak about her, and demanded more covering as a protection against the night air ; and bidding the Countess a brief good night, placed her arm in his, and led her out of the house.

CHAPTER IV.

WHEN Avice awoke in the morning, all traces of the previous night's sadness had vanished. Her heart — that might break, but that could not grow old, felt buoyantly happy, her spirit that might proudly or patiently bow down and veil itself amid storm and gloom, but never yield up its conscious right to live on freely as well as eternally—stood erect, glorying in its own unbroken strength. Avice's was one of those natures that derive their chief nourishment from grateful emotions—that inevitably droop and fall back in the absence of love and the presence of strife. Thankfulness to God for His first and later gifts, all glorious—thankfulness to such of His creatures as she came in contact with, were requirements of her life.

During the most desolate years of her life, passed at Burnham Crags and Moorlands, the coldness, the almost paralysis of her devotional

feelings, shocked and alarmed her—without help. With the first return of confidence and joy came back her power to pray fervently; and so she prayed now, before going forth into a world almost as glorious to her as it was of old.

For on every side Avice now met with love and attention: love that she could trust—attention that was something better than open neglect or contempt. How truly brotherly was the whole conduct of Mr. Osborne! how anxious now seemed the Countess de Torres to defer to her in everything! Avice could readily separate the gold from the dross here: the two were but mixed together in the way that must be and that may well be borne.

Even when she found herself seated by Mr. Osborne's side, in the very elegant brougham that the Countess had declared to be in the best style, as she glanced at it from the drawing-room window, and knew that she was on the way to the Temple, and that in a few minutes she should enter Phillip's chambers, and find there every inanimate thing as she had seen it last, she was still wonderfully happy in the midst of her extreme agitation. Her heart had

room for its many emotions, for hers was a rich and varied nature—a lofty nature, too, in its original, as had been proved.

How little was said by Avice and Mr. Osborne on entering the well-remembered room, and how much was said by the Countess; how naturally Avice first fixed her eyes upon the vacant easy chair, and approached it tremblingly, and leaned against it with her head bowed, and her tears dropping fast, while the Countess disposed herself to the best advantage in the chair opposite; what care Mr. Osborne took that Avice should first enter the bed-chamber alone, and remain there undisturbed, while kneeling once more by the side of the same old-fashioned, homely bed on which Phillip had died, need not be told.

Many coincidences soon began to strike Avice. She had entered the Temple at the very same hour in the morning on which she had entered it with Phillip: this day, as that had been, was genial and bright. Mr. Osborne had provided for their refreshment sherry and biscuits—just what Phillip had provided for her. Mr. Osborne had ordered dinner to be ready at two o'clock—the hour at which Phillip had ordered dinner

on that memorable day. And now, as Phillip did, Mr. Osborne proposed that they should walk round the Temple, and survey what was to be seen of it. He first took them to the church, as Phillip had done, and then paced with them up and down the Temple Walk. The Countess soon declared herself to be tired; and on re-entering the room, Mr. Osborne led Avice to the window. Phillip had done the same.

“ You were walking just yonder,” said Avice, looking at a particular spot, “ when I first saw you.”

“ I know it,” said Mr. Osborne. “ Then I first saw you. Phillip pointed me out to you: he spoke to you about me.”

“ And in glowing terms. Phillip admired and loved you greatly.”

“ The noble, warm-hearted fellow! You shall be the judge this day if I did not return all his love! No other friend ever has filled, or can fill, his place.”

During the interval before dinner-time, Mr. Osborne read aloud. Dull work for the Countess, whom it had inconvenienced greatly to be dragged out at so early an hour, and to

whom the whole day's proceedings appeared absurd: Avice's weak regret; the ramble about the Temple; this stupid occupation of reading; and the early dinner! What she thought did not matter much.

Mr. Osborne read Phillip's favourite passages out of Phillip's old books. Avice kissed the fly-leaves of more than one which bore his name, written with his own hand. There was one in which she had written—a present to Phillip from herself. She remembered when she gave it to him, and where, and the kiss with which he thanked her. At her request, Mr. Osborne produced a volume of his own poems, and, without being requested, wrote her name in a copy—"Avice: from her brother, Walter." What wonder that for a time Avice forgot the presence of the Countess (who was half-asleep) altogether?

When dinner appeared, Avice saw that it was the very same dinner that Phillip had ordered, down to the particular kind of tart that lay on the side table, as had lain the one of which she partook so heartily, while expecting every moment that Phillip would rouse himself and join

Very particular inquiries Mr. Osborne

must have made into the proceedings of that day: very carefully he must have noted them down, in order to keep them so fresh in his memory! Everything was exactly as it was then, except that Mr. Osborne's own servant waited, and that he sent him out of the room when dinner was placed upon the table. Avice's emotion threatened to overpower her again. What would be Mr. Osborne's further programme for the day? Westminster Abbey at last? Phillip's great treat for her, that he thought of when no longer able to recognise herself!

Avice took her seat at the table; but the instant afterwards, to the great consternation of the Countess, she burst into a passionate fit of weeping. Mr. Osborne rose and bent over her. He was glad to see her so moved: he thought it would do her good. He wished to exhaust the grief that had so long and uselessly lain hidden in her heart. He had taken her into his hands, and was applying his own remedies. He meant that she should be very happy for the future: he meant that she should never again grieve so violently for the past as now.

And it indeed did do Avice good to give way

thus. Her grief was still as a grief of the present, and she had never wept over it as she did yesterday and now. From the time of Phillip's death some terror or constraint, some overburdening of the mind by sudden shocks, or chaining of it to the contemplation of imperative necessities, or stern schooling of it to a frigid endurance foreign to her nature, had kept her tears back, frozen them up, converted them into an icy seal that needed to be dissolved or broken before what lay beneath might rush forth and leave her heart comparatively at rest. A sign from Mr. Osborne prevented the Countess saying how shocked she was at her sister's evident want of breeding; and Avice luckily resumed her composure while the dinner was yet hot. Avice did not apologize—she could not; but a tranquil happiness seemed to steal upon her, as if that sudden storm had cleared the atmosphere of her spirit.

So no comment was made, and during dinner all three were very cheerful. The Countess was especially talkative. She was elegantly dressed, and longed to display herself again in Mr. Osborne's elegant brougham. She dreaded the resuming of the reading; and then wondered if

Mr. Osborne intended to get rid of them after dinner. As he said nothing, she paved the way by remarking, that it was a delightful day for a drive in Hyde Park.

“Avice, I believe,” he said, “is better inclined for a drive to another quarter, not so fashionable, but more interesting to her—Westminster Abbey, which she has never visited. (Avice expected this, and did not show any surprise. Her eyes, as they met his, only expressed pleasure and gratitude.) But we need not interfere with each others’ wishes. If you prefer a drive in the Park, and do not mind going alone, the brougham is at your service at any hour that you may order it. In that case, of course, we shall meet here again.”

“Oh! you are very good,” said the Countess: “but I cannot think of depriving you of the brougham.”

“I did not intend to make use of the brougham,” said Mr. Osborne; “but as I have said, I shall be very happy if you will do so.”

He said what he meant, as he always did. Very happy indeed it would make him so to get rid of the Countess.

And as for several reasons the Countess was

delighted to meet this arrangement, all were satisfied. It suited her not to be accompanied by Avice, because Avice was shabbily dressed. It suited her to be alone, because at all times and in all places she wished to be the centre of attraction. So Mr. Osborne gave orders to his servant respecting the Countess, and shortly afterwards led Avice to the hackney-coach that bore them both to Westminster Abbey.

In this way Phillip had intended that she should proceed to the Abbey. Her heart had so entirely returned to that day—she had been so repeatedly reminded of it during the last few hours, so as almost to have lived it over again—that the intervening years, with their events, seemed faded out of her mind, leaving her confused as one might be who, just awaking out of a dream, finds it necessary to draw the links of actual existence together. Avice's half-dream made up *her* actual life for the moment. She had never truly lived since *then* until *now*. She felt that she was understood by Mr. Osborne even as she had been understood by Phillip. There was no doubt about his regard for her—none about her regard for him; for did not every fresh proof of his thought and care on her

account cause her heart to thrill with exquisite happiness? In one respect only she was dissatisfied with herself. Loving him to the full as she had loved Phillip, relying upon him as confidently, she yet laboured under some constraint in his presence—she could not make so free with him as he wished she should do. She feared he would consider her cold-hearted or ungrateful. She laboured with all her might to conquer a timidity and reserve of manner that might be one result of her lonely life—and she failed.

But there was a higher nature in Avice, distinct from the womanly nature that lay at the root of her embarrassment and failures. Once within sight of the venerable abbey, looking up to its noble front, this higher nature was roused ; and as God's chosen people put off their shoes on entering the holy places, so she now put off the flesh, and with reverent awe gave up her whole spirit, to solemn contemplation, amid the noble wishes and consecrated nooks of this grand old pile, at once a national sanctuary and a tomb. She was better fitted for this contemplation than she would have been in her girlhood—suffering had brought her into closer contact with hu-

manity, and sober investigation had tamed her early enthusiasm. She had undergone that one bitterest amongst trials, the breaking up of a first faith. Those who had been her idols, were her idols no longer ; yet with the abiding love for them that might not be put away, with her abiding dream of the past, shorn somewhat of its glory, her whole spirit was more in accordance with the place and its memories than it could have been years before. Sadly recalling those early impressions, still vivid, but a dead-letter to her now, she found that many of Mr. Osborne's opinions would have shocked her, that she would have been no companion for him if these changes had not taken place in herself. Radical, as he had called Mr. Thorpe, he manifested the same Republican spirit. In this respect she could not detect any shade of difference between the two. Yet there were great differences in the minds and natures of the men ; the one altogether practical, the other highly poetical ; the one uniformly stern, and reserved, and cold, even in his kindness ; the other, the larger heart and more liberal spirit, earnest and frank, and tender, if also on occasion more stormily and uncompromisingly stern. In the latter me

all the qualities that Avice had missed in her husband. Edward Thorpe had never distinguished her above those he did not like. His manner was the same with all—he exacted no more than he gave, and was content with outward observances. He meddled with no inner life, and did not understand its manifestations, or shrank from them. Therefore, Avice's rich nature had become a desolation in his hands, but the soil remained the same, and now gave promise of putting forth fresh verdure day by day.

A companion so intelligent and genial as Mr. Osborne, so dear to her for many reasons, could not fail to draw her into the fullest spiritual communion in this scene, so solemnly connected with her two-fold life of memory and imagination. She first learned here how very near their relationship to each other was. With that subdued awe, that holy quietness lingering in her spirit, she gave Mr. Osborne, as they paced together up and down the cloisters, a brief but graphic account of her life during the past nineteen years. Concealing nothing except the never-to-be-told history of her own heart; softening nothing, because she could only deal with

facts as they were; her revelations, at times, produced an effect upon her auditor that disturbed her greatly. She could herself now review all the past calmly, and it seemed to her that it was not right thus to rouse another. Yet he had begged for this confidence — he expected it — and she might not withhold it and retain the relationship with him that she wished.

“ My God ! ” he exclaimed when she came to an end, having interrupted her many times, “ and you could so far forget the conduct of this woman, this Countess de Torres, as to respond to her own advances at once, and seek her presence even before she could expect you, and supply her extravagant need out of your own small means ! (How did he learn that, Avice wondered ?) I don’t understand this—it ought not to have been ! ”

“ She is my sister,” said Avice.

“ It is false ! she is no sister to, you—never has been—she is altogether alien to you, as she was to your father, to Phillip, to Blanche. For their sakes—in remembrance of all the wrong done, you should have cast her from you with indignation. Your heart and life were not so

desolate that you needed even so base a companionship as this!"

Her heart and life *had* been so desolate. Nay, more: her intellect had been so shaken—her spirit so coerced, if not beaten down, that she was scarcely to be held accountable for this wrong step, if wrong it was. It was impossible to make herself understood here. Mr. Osborne was right in believing that no real friendship could exist between her sister and herself; it never had done, and never would. He was right, perhaps, in declaring that they ought never to have met again. Avice was her own judge, and she met the sharp rebuke meekly, but with dignity.

"What I have done is done; and as far as my own motives are concerned, even here, I have nothing to regret."

"Forgive me!" said Mr. Osborne, grasping the hand that lay upon his arm; "I spoke strongly—I feel strongly in everything that concerns you. It makes me half-mad to see a nature like yours, so beautiful in its simplicity and earnest truthfulness—to see a heart like yours, so warm and generous, put down and imposed upon by the insolent assumption and

barefaced self-seeking of that woman! 'Consider, Avice!' he continued, tightening his grasp upon her hand, while his rich voice deepened in its tender earnestness, "could you bear in *me* any atom of the failure that meets you altogether in that quarter? Do you not feel, as I do, that the lightest shadow of doubt or distrust between us two would divide us, not in spirit only, but outwardly, so that we could not meet and commune together as we do now? Oh, Avice! life is too brief to be wasted on shams! Put them away from you; live a full life while you may live—or die!"

He, perhaps, did not consider that while largely helping to make himself everything to Avice, he was perilling the happiness over which such shams as he reprobated had little power. In every trembling pulse of her heart, Avice now silently acknowledged that all he said was true—how true to her she might not say. Something she did say that passed by; and presently Mr. Osborne spoke thus:

"You respect your husband's memory, and he must have possessed much worth. What you tell me about his labours for the improvement of the miners, is something quite new to

me. . From various sources I have, at different periods, learned a great deal respecting the schools at Burnham, and the general improvement of the whole population in that neighbourhood. This appeared to me to be a great and good work; but I certainly never heard your husband's name mentioned in connection with it. All the credit was given to Mr. Rycroft, who indeed seems to have received it as if it were his due. He wrote to me many years ago, before the schools were in existence, as I understood, mentioning the scheme as his own, and hoping it would meet with my approbation. I approved, of course; it was what I should myself have done if it had suited me to exercise any authority after my father's death, which it did not. I was pleased and surprised too to find this spirit in Mr. Rycroft; it was the first good I had known of him, and the last. How comes it that even in his own neighbourhood all the honour of the undertaking is yielded to him?"

Avice said this was not the case. She spoke warmly and eloquently on the subject of her husband's untiring and noiseless labours. She gave the whole history of the two schools from

their primitive commencement, until the period at which (through the solicitation of Mr. Thorpe) Mr. Rycroft and others came forward with late help. She spoke of the part she had herself taken in the reformatory work under her husband's direction. It might as well be said that Mrs. Rycroft, or any one else amongst the lady visitors, who occasionally came to look at the scholars and question herself as to their progress, were associated with her in her work, as that Mr. Rycroft took any part whatever in the labours of Edward Thorpe during the years in which great progress was made.

“Besides,” continued Avice, “Mr. Rycroft was not the man to have commenced such a work amongst such a population. He would not have succeeded if he had tried. He was then, as he is now, disliked by the miners; a rough, independent race of men who are not to be driven, even to the bettering of their condition. Mr. Rycroft only understands driving—Edward Thorpe began by winning the respect and love of the men. Some amongst them, I believe, would have laid down their lives for him; the very roughest obeyed him as a child obeys a parent. He always shewed consideration for

them—they could not doubt the interest he took in their welfare, and this was the secret of his great power over them. Go to the miners themselves and ask who it was that elevated their condition to what it is now. You will not hear them mention Mr. Rycroft's name."

Mr. Osborne was profoundly interested in all that Avice said. More than once he was moved to express great wrath, especially when Avice spoke of the state visits to the school paid by Mrs. Rycroft and others, who had evidently treated her with little ceremony as the wife of a subordinate and a teacher of the lowest class of scholars. Avice Desborough, the almost idolized sister of Phillip, being condescended to by the wife of John Rycroft! The thought made his blood boil—he could not command himself—he was compelled to drop Avice's arm and pace rapidly to and fro for several minutes. Questioning her now, he learned more of the secrets that lay under the surface of the history she had given him. Her altogether isolated life—the reasons for her compulsory silence respecting the past, even with her husband—the little sympathy that existed betwixt that husband's family and herself. Again, he fell back.

upon Avice's daughter, the child who must have made all her happiness during those years ; who as yet did not know to what family her mother belonged, and who was now old enough to appreciate and enjoy thoroughly the sudden accessions of station and great wealth that awaited her. But when he spoke on this subject, Avice's views of it surprised him. For, to her heart, this prospect of elevating her daughter brought no joy. Lydia possessed no one characteristic of the race to which her mother belonged. The old Thorpe greed of money, which had not appeared in her father at all, was prominent in her ; and it was a question with Avice whether ministering to this passion in her child would conduce to her happiness. Even for her child's sake, she wished this fortune that had come so late, had not come at all. But she could not explain all this to Mr. Osborne.

“ I have told you what Mr. Thorpe's opinions were,” she said, “ and what his wishes were, especially with respect to his daughter. It is true that he left me free to act as I would, in case of such an event happening as has happened ; but I do not feel eager to make use of my power. I must have time for consideration.

And, in the meantime, I wish to live as quietly and unostentatiously as possible. Wealth can now bring no happiness to me beyond that of ministering to the wants of others. Whatever may be purchased by it—the consideration of the world, a luxurious abode, obsequious attendance and show altogether—would only greatly oppress me just now. I wish for a time to lodge and board at the house where I sleep. I spoke to Mrs. Glover about it this morning, and she will be glad to accommodate me. You must allow me time to see further and to think, my friend."

The subdued, almost sad, tone of her voice moved Mr. Osborne in the right way. As he looked in her pale, thoughtful face, and considered the stern discipline she had undergone, his great heart ached. He acknowledged that she was right. He had been about to deal with her as he might well have dealt with the Countess. But as he yielded all this, something within him rebelled more than ever against the past.

"Your husband was a stern taskmaster to you, at least," he said. "He did not minister to your greatest need. He did not seek to raise

and heal the bowed and bruised spirit within you. You will carry in your heart to the grave the marks of neglected wounds, Avice ! My God ! how many should bear the blame of this !"

"Not my husband," said Avice. "According to his knowledge he acted for the best. It was his nature to be kind, and he was kind to me."

"It was all wrong together !" said Mr. Osborne, impatiently. "From the day on which I lost sight of you until this day the evil committed has been crying up to God for vengeance ! Providence interferes with our plans and hopes in mysterious ways often enough, and we bear what must be borne ; but I for one cannot tamely put up with man's interference—or woman's, which may be something worse. All that you have suffered—that you may yet suffer—you owe to the Otleys and this Countess de Torres. Their very names seem to blister my tongue as I utter them. Expect me to avoid one and all of them alike. To the last moment of all our lives I invest them with my undying detestation !"

He was only able to calm himself presently,

because he saw how much his violence disturbed Avice. He recognised all Phillip's nature in her—a nature gentle, merciful, and forgiving. Perhaps he would not have liked that she should be other than she was, and yet her extreme patient endurance irritated him. He did not understand that her nature was even stronger than his own here, inasmuch as it is easier to resent an injury than silently leave it in God's hands. Much easier when, as was the case with Avice, an excess of sensitiveness and pride in right-doing are present to deepen every wound given, and lay bare all the enormity of the giver. Avice was keeping her own high ground, while he looked down upon her pityingly.

Yet in his own way Mr. Osborne was right. He gave honest expression to the feelings that God had implanted in him, and without outraging his own nature he could not have done less. And such as he, liable to extremes as they are, are needed in a world abounding with violence and wrong. Needed chiefly; because in such natures—vast, and powerful, and rugged—all the gentler and nobler qualities—liberality, unbounded generosity, unfathomable and enduring tenderness, take firmest root.

The strong contrasts in Mr. Osborne's character were a great charm to Avice. It was a happiness to her to know how that spirit, so terrible sometimes in its wrath, could soften towards herself—could think and care for her. She was unmistakeably to him what others might not be—she was capable of ministering to his happiness, for her presence made him happy. That outgoing of her whole heart to him was met, she knew; and for the first time since Phillip's death the blessed sense of security in a mutual regard filled and tranquillised her whole soul.

And in this hard, rough, cold world it was really a great matter to stand in the relation to Mr. Osborne that Avice stood now. He needed an object on which he could lavish the kind feeling, the love that was in him. He needed the presence about him of a heart on which his own could rest with full faith and trust; and such a heart was sure to be abundantly ministered to by the overflowing tenderness of his nature.

Certain was it to be benefited under all circumstances by the entire manliness of that nature, that craved for no small personal indul-

gences, and was not to be moved to anger by any of the small negligences that provoke the wrath and form the chief annoyances of inferior men. Even the violence that he at times exhibited was not native to him, except as it was a ready expression of his abhorrence of wrong ; and after having yielded to it, it seemed a necessity to him to be doubly gentle and kind with those who approached him ordinarily. So now, conscious of having disturbed Avice by his impetuosity, a feeling bordering on remorse mingled with the higher feelings that prompted his warm attentions and almost caressing words.

Avice's heart yielded to the influence of this manner in Mr. Osborne as naturally as a flower yields to the influence of the sun. It was this tender care for her on the part of another that seemed to make her return to the early days so complete ; and when at night, her head reclining on her pillow, she looked back upon the day just gone, and yesterday, it was wonderful to her how large a part of her past existence they seemed to comprehend ; her brief life in them had been so full of interest, her heart had been so overflowing with satisfaction and happiness.

The Countess was very much dissatisfied with everything. With Mr. Osborne first, whose manner altogether wounded her vanity, and excited her alarm on the score of her worldly prospects—he evidently wishing to withdraw Avice from her companionship, if possible. With Avice, because, simple and tame spirited as she was, and certainly unfit for anything better, she seemed to settle down quietly at the Gloves, to make no further inquiries respecting the wealth to which she was said to be entitled, nor apparently to contemplate putting it to any use. All this was doubly mortifying to her because in contemplation of a speedy display of her sister's wealth, she had ventured on a large display of her own natural arrogance; finding fault with all Mrs. Rouse's arrangements, expressing herself disgusted with the poorness of the accommodation altogether, and speaking loudly and largely on the subject of servants, equipages, and some fashionably-situated mansion to which she was about to remove. Dubois, also, who from the bed-room had heard all Mr. Osborne said, had given herself airs with Mrs. Rouse, and now wondered greatly why Madame Thorpe contented herself with such poor lodging

as she found at the Gloves. Mrs. Rouse herself wondered at this, after the intimations she had received, and, when several days had elapsed, began more than ever to suspect that she had to deal with a set of impostors.

Avice, meanwhile, made herself very happy in her temporary abode. At some period of each day she was sure to meet Mr. Osborne. If the day was fine, they had a quiet walk together in the garden in Sloane Street; or he came in the brougham and took her out for a drive, enduring the company of the Countess for her sake; or he passed an evening with her and the Countess together. In this way a very happy week passed. She did not marvel at his not having again alluded to her future movements. He was silent out of respect to her own wishes, and it was she that must speak now.

And no day passed, and no night, during which Avice did not think long and deeply on the course that it would be best for her to take. She retained much of her early taste for splendour, yet the habits of the greater half of her life stood in the way, and she did not wish for it now. She was conscious that externals could not contribute to her happiness. She had been

altogether disowned, lost sight of, by her father's family; and her own native pride, and respect for her husband's memory and wishes, alike determined her to avoid being brought in contact with what is called the great world. It seemed to her an injustice that her unknown friend—who was of her kin, so Mr. Osborne said—had entirely overlooked her sister. She would remedy this defect by dividing the wealth thus left to herself with the Countess de Torres. And still what would be left troubled her. She would not minister to her child's passion for money: she had herself learned to what noble uses money might be put. Her ultimate resolution was, to purchase a small villa residence in the neighbourhood of London (she could not return to Moorlands to *live*, only to *die*), and make it a pleasant home to some well-educated woman, who would be at once a governess for Lydia and a companion for herself. Her naturally sanguine temperament led her to expect much from the advantages that it was now in her power to afford Lydia, who was still young enough to profit by such training as she contemplated.

She deliberated upon this scheme after she

had formed it, and it satisfied her so entirely that she did not attempt to frame any other. But new to her present happiness, and needing rest, and fearing a little contention, she did not divulge her scheme at once—content with the knowledge of possessing power over the future, so far as it concerned others. And she contemplated doing much before the chief persons concerned were made aware of her intentions.

Lydia should have the pleasant surprise of being suddenly and unexpectedly introduced to her new home. Upon the Countess should burst all at once the knowledge of the division Avice had decided upon. Without consulting Mr. Osborne, she could not carry out either of these plans ; and she knew that he would make a stand against one of them, and so hesitated, fearing alike his anger and his scarcely-to-be-withstood influence over herself.

So Avice wrote daily to her daughter without making any revelation ; and the Countess de Torres began to complain that Avice was using herself very ill. So she herself thought—so she said to Dubois. Avice had lately insulted her by a gift of fifty pounds (the half of a sum placed in Avice's hands by Mr. Osborne, and

which she had hesitated to take, though he told her it was her own), and the Countess was roused to resentment. What was the use of fifty pounds to her, in the midst of her necessities? If it had been five hundred, what would have been the use of it?

Avice's meanness struck her as being something remarkably detestable. She could not help her mind being so constituted that her own entire desertion of Avice years ago appeared as nothing in comparison with this conduct of Avice to herself now.

Was the weak, niggardly creature, acting under Mr. Osborne's orders? Was Mr. Osborne seeking to possess himself of her wealth, by becoming her lord and master? The Countess surmised thus much, and felt satisfied that she was right, and writhed in the consciousness of being foiled every way; and wondered to what device she should turn next.

Avice did not quite forget herself, while thinking and caring for others. She put off altogether the attire she had worn at Moorlands; and in her fashionably-made half-mourning, and brightened up altogether as she was by the yet agitated happiness of her heart, she looked

remarkably handsome. So the Countess grudgingly acknowledged to herself, while still believing that Avice did not understand how to make the most of her personal advantages. The greatest charm of Avice's countenance—alike beyond the reach of art and the comprehension of the Countess—was expression; and when at times the shining forth of her spirit seemed to reveal all her nature, as it was in the fullness of God's intention, she was unmistakeably beautiful. In this highest order of beauty she improved every day.

The hour arrived at length in which Avice found resolution to unfold her plans to Mr. Osborne. She thought he smiled oddly while, with all the earnestness natural to her, she declared what her wishes were. He certainly did smile very oddly, very provokingly, when she came to a conclusion. Then he said, very gravely,

“There is one great impediment in the way of your acting as you seem to wish. It is not in your power to alienate this property, which is settled on your descendants—on your daughter, as your sole child. If she dies during your life-time, and childless, you will still be powerless;

because in that case, and after your death, the whole would be devoted to the benefit of public institutions. Such are the terms of the will."

Avice was again left afloat, and much troubled.

"It is at least in my power to make no use at all of this property," she said.

"I have tried a plan of that kind, and I would not recommend its adoption by others," said Mr. Osborne. "Strange that we should both be so constituted as to be little endangered by this great temptation to others! You must still trust a little to me, Avice. Will you consent to keep silence on this subject until another week has passed?"

There was nothing better for Avice to do. During this other week, even happier than the last, her heart almost forgot that it had ever known sorrow.

CHAPTER V.

“WHAT a big footman’s knock!” exclaimed one of Mrs. Glover’s youngest boys, on hearing, in the forenoon of a certain day, a prolonged peal from the street-door knocker. The knock was certainly longer and louder than any Avice herself had heard before; yet, anticipating that it heralded Mr. Osborne’s approach, she turned pale and trembled. Meeting him every day as she did, she could not conquer this agitation, on first entering his presence.

She had risen from the table, where she had been busily employed in drawing patterns for needle-work, and stood up, when Mr. Osborne entered the room, leading by the hand a plain-featured, middle-aged, but very lady-like female.

“Permit me, Avice,” he said, “to make you

acquainted with a very excellent friend of mine, Miss Deane. Mrs. Thorpe, Miss Deane."

Avice readily held out her hand, and said she was happy to see Miss Deane. Miss Deane seemed to hesitate about taking the hand, and made a more sweeping and obsequious kind of obeisance than to Avice appeared at all necessary.

"We have come to take you out for a drive," continued Mr. Osborne. "A *very* old friend of yours is in the carriage, waiting to see you. Don't look so inquiring, for I shall not reveal his name yet. We will sit down here, while you make yourself ready."

Avice flew lightly up the stairs, and in a few minutes reappeared with an unusually rich colour on either cheek, to which the blood had rushed back in a full tide.

Mr. Osborne seemed to notice some improvement, for he said,

"You are looking just as I wish you to look this morning."

If Avice had examined the carriage and its appointments, which she did not, she would have found that, servants included, it was what the Countess would have pronounced to be a

very, distinguished affair. For her part, she thought only of its occupant, and was presently much surprised to find herself seated by the side of something alive, so completely enveloped in greatcoats, mufflers, and a kind of travelling-cap resembling a vizor, that nothing was visible, to give her an idea what description of personage this might be.

When the steps were put up and the door shut, and before the carriage drove off, Mr. Osborne briefly said—

“ Mr. Vernon—Avice.”

“ Ah, an old friend indeed !” exclaimed Avice, turning eagerly to the great bundle of clothes, and still seeing nothing else.

But something moved within the bundle. First, two very withered and emaciated hands became visible ; then the vizor was slowly raised, disclosing part of the face of a very aged man, who was evidently also an invalid. It was the same old man whom we have already described as Mr. Osborne’s visitor.

“ A much older friend than you are aware of,” said Mr. Vernon, holding out one hand, which Avice took in both hers, while with the other he adjusted his spectacles. “ Come a little nearer,

try dear, and let me look at you. So haven't been able to kill you amongst them, eh ? I said you'd live long enough if you suffered enough—all the longer for being tried. I hope *we're* not about to kill you now with kindness, mistaken or too late. Such things happen in this world. That'll do, my dear, you're looking well ; I'm glad to see you."

He withdrew his hand, pulled down his cap, and again became invisible in his wrappings. A severe fit of coughing presently seized and shook him all over. Mr. Osborne put up the one unclosed window, and then began to converse with Avice and Miss Deane as if he understood that Mr. Vernon had said all he meant to say at present.

Avice now began to suspect that Mr. Vernon and her unknown friend were one. The life-long love of the former for her aunt, his evident thought for herself, made this probable. And the surmise was pleasant to her—it was a pleasure to her to see once more this venerable man who had at some period of his life certainly been dear to her Aunt de Burgh. She wished to see more of him—she hoped that he was now intending to take her on to his residence,

and felt much satisfaction on seeing that the carriage drove towards London.

It stopped at length before the door of a house in Curzon Street—a house that had been shut up for years, until its former occupant had passed out of mind ; and the windows had become blackened with dust and cobwebs, and the paint had blistered and cracked, and fallen away from the door and window-frames, and fashionable people had ceased to wonder whether the costly furniture and valuable pictures, said to be left inside, were rotting also.

In the space of little more than a week the whole of the interior had been renovated, and the outside, with the windows cleaned, did not look the less aristocratic for much visible dilapidation and some remaining dirt. The door was opened by a porter, and Mr. Vernon was helped out of the carriage and into the house by two stout footmen. The smallness of the hall first struck Avioe, who was not familiar with town residences, and who, at the moment, was thinking of the hall at Stanley Place.

When she had seen further, the whole house reminded her of Walpole and Strawberry Hill, so crowded was it with pictures, statues, busts,

articles of vertu, books, curiosities of all kinds, and furniture, quaint as well as costly. Without judging of the taste of the whole, as others might have done, Avice felt that this lavish filling up of every available nook imparted an air of comfort and hospitality, and sociability, to the place, that was very pleasant to her. Judging, as far as she could compare, she felt that this elegant profusion suited her better than had done the great, naked rooms at Stanley Place, or the dingy apartments at Hampton Court; or the trim, cosy little rooms at Burnham Crags, or the meagrely furnished and dreary parlours and chambers at Moorlands. It was something new to her, and yet not new, for she became familiar with it at once; it was something to which her inner life was allied, if her outward life had never come in contact with it before.

She did not understand how much of an invalid Mr. Vernon was, even when she saw what support he needed on entering his house and ascending the stairs. He was very old, near upon his hundredth year, and it was natural that she should attribute his feebleness to age. Yet only a very short time before he had been an

active man. She had yet to learn this, and why she saw him as he was now.

Miss Deane followed Mr. Vernon up-stairs, and Mr. Osborne drew Avice into one of the lower apartments.

“Thank God,” he exclaimed, divesting Avice of her bonnet and outward coverings (an that seemed so natural in him now that had almost forgotten how to perform it for herself), “you are at home at last! Safe at home, Avice! come near the fire and take possession of this chair.”

“How luxurious everything here looks, and is!” said Avice, sinking in the chair, that was covered with the costliest velvet, and looking round.

“Does this please you? I expected it would. Those who have been proved to endure privation well, are best capable of thoroughly enjoying such gratifications for soul and sense as wealth can abundantly supply. You will find this house as interesting as a museum; for Mr. Vernon possessed fine taste in the arts in his earlier days, and he was for years engaged in collecting whatever is most valuable in this house and at Stanley Place. In his day he

been something better than a mere lover of whatever is rare or beautiful: though, perhaps, you remember having heard him spoken of as a hard, penurious man."

Avice had heard this; but she had chiefly heard of him as being a liberal, kind-hearted man.

"As such, your Aunt de Burgh must have understood him well," said Mr. Osborne. "The whole secret of the matter was, that whatever he did was done without ostentation. His large benevolence, like the sources of some amongst the mightiest of rivers, remained hidden from the world, but its bountiful stream was ever flowing, and producing fertility. I tell you this, because I wish you to understand Mr. Vernon altogether. Presently you will learn more from himself."

"I suspect that I have little more to learn," said Avice. "Something within me tells me that all the remaining friends of my life are round me now; and I am so satisfied that I have no wish to seek further."

"Thank God!" said Mr. Osborne, fervently. Then, quitting this subject altogether, he drew Avice's attention to the various objects of in-

terest in the room ; and the two were thus occupied, when Miss Deane appeared, to say that Mr. Vernon would be glad to see Mrs. Thorpe. Then Mr. Osborne took leave, promising to see Avice again in the evening.

*Avice followed Miss Deane up the stairs, admiring, by the way, the long window of painted glass, and the statues that adorned the landing-place.

In the drawing-room, more richly adorned and furnished than the room she had just quitted, Avice found Mr. Vernon. Outwardly she saw him as he was now ; an aged and feeble man, whose physical powers showed as nothing in the presence of man's more enduring works. With these he did not enter into outer competition, for his dress was faded like himself, and quaint in fashion, and worn negligently, as if the wearer contemplated shortly putting it off altogether. Avice soon lost sight of this, looking in his eyes, still bright and beaming with benevolence.

“ My child,” he said, when they were left alone, “ I am about to attempt making a whole day out of my evening, which is well nigh spent. I am about to ask your help while so cheating

myself. You know why it is that I cleave to you now?"

Avice said that she knew.

" You have never heard the whole history ; I will tell it you," he continued. " I became acquainted with your aunt De Burgh while she was yet much such a girl as you were when I first saw you at Hampton Court ; much the same, not only in years, but in character and manner ;—as quiet, as thoughtful in the midst of the crowd ; as much of an enthusiast, and as readily to be understood by those she loved. I was a mere boy then, younger in years than your aunt, and every way her inferior. My own chief characteristics at that time, and long afterwards, were an intense selfishness, an overweening conceit, that were continually laying me open to annoyance ; none of my friends or acquaintances being able to discover any extraordinary merit in me.

" The occasion that thus brought your aunt and myself together was an old-fashioned juvenile party in an old-fashioned country-house. We two, amongst others, passed nearly three weeks there : and you may believe that there was not much good in me when I declare that

I was miserable the whole time, because, as I supposed, I was not treated with proper consideration — that is, I was not distinguished above the rest. I despised my elders, who were so lamentably blind. I looked down with contempt upon the romping boys, and fairly hated the girls, who took, as I thought, undue liberties with me. I had no conversational powers ; I was not given to mirth ; and their everlasting small-talk and ringing laughter wearied me, as well as wounded my dignity.

“ Mary de Burgh was an exception to the rest. She ministered to the joy of others, she promoted it by every means in her power ; but there was a self-possession in her manner at all times, an occasional gravity, that led me to regard her with some favour. My good will was chiefly propitiated by noticing that her eyes were frequently fixed upon me in a thoughtful manner. I said within myself—‘ Mary de Burgh has some discrimination ; she perceives that there is something superior about me.’

“ It was true that Mary was attracted towards me. Her father and mine had been great friends, and my father was dead. I had only just put off mourning for him, and Mary be-

lieved that some lingering regret for his loss had much to do with my shy and distant manner. So Mary singled me out from the rest ; she paid me particular attention ; her whole bearing towards me was gentle and respectful. I was gratified without being grateful ; but I was flattered, because Mary was a general favourite. I liked her because I believed she liked me : love her I did not, because I could love nothing so well as myself. But as far as it was possible for me to attach myself to any human being, I attached myself to Mary. I went to school and college after that, but we still met at intervals, and we corresponded. Our intimacy was encouraged by Mary's family, for Lord Otley was poor, and I was supposed to be the heir to great wealth. It was encouraged by my mother, who had great respect for Lord Otley's pedigree ; and my subsequent advances were encouraged by Mary herself, who did not fear to yield up her whole heart to the keeping of one utterly incapable of prizing it for its own sake.

“ If I had not loved myself so absorbingly, I should have loved Mary. As it was, I felt that she was necessary to me. No one soothed my vanity as she did ; none allowed, like her, that

met with my desert. And she was not altogether deceived in me, and would sometimes reprove and remonstrate when she saw me decidedly going wrong. There must have been a charm to her in the consciousness of being what she was to so self-absorbed a man—in the knowledge that she alone was privileged to say anything with impunity. Her affectionate appreciation rendered even her reproof flattering. If she wished me to correct some small fault, she spoke of it in connection with the noble qualities she supposed me to possess, and which might be obscured by it in common eyes. I had one propensity which led her to suppose that I was generous—a propensity to relieve distress, as the readiest way of ridding myself of its importunity, and shutting my eyes on its supposed wretchedness and squalor. I threw money about in this way, wondering all the time why people who were in want did not die instead of troubling others with their necessities. While I was thus wondering, and while Mary was giving me credit for many good qualities that I did not possess, my own wants were accumulating, so that before long my necessities made me also very clamorous.

“ I began life with the idea that I was born to be a gentleman. I scorned the professions, because of the plodding toil which they exacted, and because I would not encroach on what seemed to me the peculiar province of needy men. Yet I was by no means rich; I was merely burdened with the curse of great expectations. My paternal patrimony was small; my mother, who was proud in a certain way, and who had largely contributed to spoil me—(God bless her! I learned long ago that she deserved a better son)—led a secluded life on a scanty annuity, comforting herself with the assurance that she should live to see her son become a great man. I was left by my father to the guardianship of his second cousin, also a Vernon—a man who, in his own day, was alike noted for his parsimony and his immense wealth. He was a bachelor, and I, as the last of a somewhat distinguished race, was generally looked upon as his heir. And not without reason, for he himself proclaimed everywhere that I was his heir; and he made his will, and allowed me to see it; and allowed my mother to witness its execution, with eyes dimmed by proud and happy tears. Having done this, he had

done all that he could do ; and cloud, and darkness, and storm followed the brief sunshine.

“ Mr. Vernon was unmistakeably a hard, penurious man, who could part with nothing during his lifetime ; I was as unmistakeably a selfish man of luxurious habits, and we inevitably clashed. He might be about fifty years old when I became of age, and he lived till I was upwards of sixty. In the interval of course my mother died ; everything died to me in that interval, except Mary’s love. That latter did sustain me in some measure, but its power was not sufficient to raise such a mere mass of earthiness as I then was. It was proposed to me to attempt bettering my condition with such means as I was supposed to possess—means squandered, anticipated long ago. Mary wished me to enter one of the professions ; she was willing to share any fate with me ; but I was not prepared to encounter difficulty for her sake. We went on in our different ways, and in the course of hers Mary at length made a stand. When near her thirtieth year she became maid of honour to the queen. (Queen Charlotte), and she determined then that for the future we should be no more than friends. She voluntarily released me from

all obligation, and I, self-willed as ever, would not be so released. I rebelled against this inclination to give me up, though I had virtually given her up long ago. The extremity proved to me that I could not live out of the atmosphere of Mary's love. I had always been a hanger-on about court, and this inclination now showed in me more than ever. Chiefly through Mary's interest, I at length obtained the appointment of gentleman usher to the queen; and this post, that might not at all have suited a better man, suited me, because it brought me in daily contact with Mary.

"I have said nothing about Mary's sacrifices for my sake. I had allowed her to pay my debts more than once, without thinking of the impoverishment to herself. I knew that she had rejected many advantageous offers because her heart could love only once and for ever. I *had* some true appreciation of her worth; I hoped to prove this to her; but in the meantime I could only wait; and in the meantime Mr. Vernon would neither open his coffers nor die.

"So we both grew old—Mary and I. I was in my sixty-first year when Mr. Vernon quitted this life, leaving me the very poorest amongst

rich men. My first act was to take this house and furnish it according to my taste. My next was to solicit Mary to become its mistress. But Mary—her high faith sealed in heaven, and safe there—was now beyond my reach. True friend as she had always been, she exerted herself to raise me above the dregs of my remaining selfishness. She pointed out the many openings that yet remained to a useful and even happy life ; and I, accustomed to her sway, yielded to it so far as to become helpful to others, if not happy in myself.

• “ But while thus subordinate to her will, I regarded herself with a bitterness that did not die out until she died. My love had been of slow growth ; it was in its prime when she finally rejected me. At that time I had learned her whole worth ; the whole worth of the love that had endured, suffered, survived so much ; and I had not yet undergone such purifying process as would have enabled me to understand the holy friendship with whose sanctifying influences she sought to surround me. So to the latest hour of your Aunt de Burgh’s life I remained unworthy of her.

“ I acted unworthily in many ways, influenced

by the bitterness of which I have spoken. I knew how much her heart was interested in her nephew, Colonel Desborough, and his family. I knew that the Colonel had a struggle to live ; and I was piqued because she would not confide to me her troubles of this kind, and so kept aloof. My God ! I was still capable of forgetting how readily she had helped me, unsolicited, in my trouble ; still incapable of comprehending that a sensitive nature and noble soul like hers might only struggle and endure, and voicelessly pass away !

“ But I was sufficiently changed to make resolves, and pursue them steadfastly. My old habit of waiting was not to be put off, and I waited now my own set time for proving myself to be something better than I seemed. I did not consider my great age, because I was still strong, as I did not consider Mary’s age, because she was still beautiful to me. In these respects only I was conscious of being not altogether of the earth, earthy. But it was impossible to be brought so long as I was in such close contact with a superior nature like Mary de Burgh’s, and not be influenced by it. Insensibly I had imbibed many of her opinions, and allowed her principles to influence me. I

had all along been growing up to her standard, if I fell far short of it at last. Therefore, at this period of my life, I had some right notions of things.

“ For instance, I knew that it was better to allow a young man to struggle for himself with any poor resource, than keep him idle on the strength of expectations, however rich. I had determined to make your brother, Phillip, my heir before his feet touched English ground ; yet, with all the means in my hands, I never offered him help, or gave him or others the slightest intimation of my intention. His manly struggles, his perseverance and industry, formed a glorious contemplation to me as compared with the inglorious idleness and abject dependence of my own wasted youth. I envied and honoured him too much to be hasty with such help as I could give ; and in this and other ways I overlooked the anxious hearts that needed sustainment. It mattered nothing that I was punished as well as others.

“ I was in Ireland when Phillip Desborough died, and I only learned his death on my arrival in London, a week afterwards. Mary de Burgh died on the very day of my arrival—died of a

broken heart at last! No mistake about that, Avice."

How calmly the old man said this! Avice, who had been listening with intense interest, who had been recognizing her aunt in every noble trait of character disclosed by Mr. Vernon, who felt that none had loved Mary de Burgh as she deserved to be loved, who now learned, for the first time, what joy for his generous heart had been in store for Phillip, struggled hard with her emotions, and broke down at last. Bitter and unavailing tears streamed from her eyes like rain.

"Thank God that you can weep!" said Mr. Vernon, after allowing this passion to have its way. "The depths of human agony and degradation are ever dry, and Hope is not dead so long as the fountain of tears remains unsealed. My child, I have now to speak of yourself—consider—you are all that is left to me!"

There was a wailing tone in his voice now, that touched Avice, for she also had suffered much, and she could feel for the solitary man. She had been seated at some distance from him, now she made free with a small ottoman, and placed herself by his side. By some equally

natural means, one of his hands became imprisoned in both hers.

“Next to your brother, Phillip,” continued Mr. Vernon, “I liked—loved, I may say now—Walter Osborne.—Keep those little hands still while I go on.—I admired in him the independence of spirit, the entire freedom from all the fopperies incidental to youth, that distinguished him in my eyes even before Phillip died. But it was Phillip’s death that made me acquainted with his whole worth. When I learned that Mary was indeed gone; taken from me before I had proved to her that I was not altogether heartless; that Phillip had perished in his first prime; that both had passed from the earth so suddenly, and in what appeared to me an awfully mysterious manner; I thought that God was chastising me through them for the many sins of my misspent life, and I said that the punishment was more than I could bear. Sorrow and remorse bowed me to the earth; I was for a long time stretched on a bed of sickness, from which I prayed never to rise again. But I was still strong, and I lived—and I was a changed man, Avicé. I immediately sought for you and Blanche, intending to take you to my home at once; to

endow you with all I possessed ; you especially —you—Mary's favourite. I sought for you, and lo ! you also had got beyond my reach. I went first to Walter Osborne, and from that day to this, he and I have been as father and son. He had already made efforts to discover where you were hidden, but without effect. Lady Otley protested that she knew nothing whatever of your movements ; your sister Clementina declared that you had never communicated with her. We believed these statements to be false ; we have since proved that they were false."

Avice bowed her head over the hand she held ; bowed it in deep shame for others as well as sorrow for herself.

" I wrote to Clementina and the letter was never returned to me," she said. " I supposed that she received it."

" She has lately acknowledged that she received it, as well as another sent at a later period, informing her of your marriage. Finding that it was impossible to obtain any information in the quarters where we had a right to seek it, Walter and I waited as patiently as we might, believing that before long we should receive intelligence of you. You wrote to Walter Osborne,

and that gave us hope—you might write again. In any great extremity I felt sure that Ritson would apply to me. Ritson, who I knew would never forsake you, but share your fortunes to the last. To this day I do not understand why Ritson was silent."

"I believe that Ritson's mind was much shaken by my aunt's death, and our subsequent difficulties," said Avice. "Certainly all her old energy deserted her, and her intellect went on decaying, until long before she died she was quite childish. However, she did mention you on one occasion, when Blanche was very ill, and wished I would apply to you. I silenced her at once; I had no claim upon you, and I was already weary of meeting repulse."

"My own great hope was in Ritson," continued Mr. Vernon. "Your sister went out to India, protesting to the last that she was ignorant of your place of abode; but she promised to communicate with us if she received any intelligence from you. Lady Otley made the same promise, and we doubted, disbelieved both. After a long interval, Walter Osborne received a letter from India, in which your sister stated that she had heard from you; that you had in-

formed her of Blanche's death, and your 'own intention to go out immediately to one of the colonies—what particular colony you did not state—accompanied by Ritson. Some passages in your letter, she said, led her to suppose that you were contemplating being married. This information your sister also conveyed to Lady Otley in set terms, and Lady Otley produced the letter. The whole was a cheat and a lie, as we know now—as you know very well."

Avice could only bow her head more heavily ; this humiliation was something worse than her worst troubles.

" Both Walter Osborne and myself were inclined to think that there was some truth in this statement. It seemed probable that you had met with protection ; it was not improbable that you would gladly embrace any opportunity that offered of quitting a country in which you had met with hard usage. But I cannot tell you what distress, what regret and disappointment overshadowed us while so believing. What we could not believe was, that you had left your sister without the power of communicating with you. This Walter Osborne protested in his own strong way when he wrote in reply ; he

desired to see your letter. But no answer ever came.

"I had already made my will, bequeathing everything to you and your children after you. Walter Osborne, sternly silent now respecting everything in the past, entered earnestly on the career he had marked out for himself. I in my retirement was wonderfully sustained by a presentiment that I should live to see you again; I had another object in living on. Old as I was, I had as yet accomplished little that was worth accomplishing; I had yet to begin living such a true life as Mary had desired me to live; and even for her sake I determined to become, if possible, all that she had wished. I could take no merit to myself because I was less selfish and craving, and indifferent to others than of old; I had used up, worn out my worst vices, not quitted them. But I did the next best thing—I learned to despise, abhor my former self. The consequences of my original vileness will pursue me to the last, and small indeed has been the amount of good left me to accomplish. From you who have heard my confession—you whom I have wronged so much—I now crave forgiveness!"

Avice started with pained surprise.

tremulous and entreating tones of the old man's voice cut her to the heart.

"My dear sir!" she exclaimed, "why speak thus to me? I can have nothing to forgive—forgive what?"

"All that you have yourself suffered all your life long. Do you suppose that *I* accuse Lady Otley or your sister with having left you to want, and such strange help as you might find? Not I; I have myself been the chief wrong-doer throughout. Long before your aunt's death you ought to have been placed beyond the reach of needing other protection than mine. Long before then you ought to have learned to regard me as a second father; in my home you ought to have been cherished, educated, nurtured as became a daughter of your race. I knew then that it should be so; I wished it; craved for it with my whole soul, as one means of paying back a small part of the large debt I owed Mary; and yet the cursed blindness, and hardness, and exacting self-love of my heart held me back! Don't you understand that I am Phillip's murderer—and Mary's? Don't you know that Phillip died of over-anxiety and unnecessary hard toil, and that if I had not acted a baser

part than man ever acted before, he would have been living now? Of what did your father die? Did he not sink under the struggle of striving to do with his small means what might not be done? Before God I account myself the ruthless destroyer of all these; and for you, the sole survivor, what remains that I can do? Can riches bring back lost happiness, or purchase new? Will not your soul sit desolate in the midst of this wealth, associated as it is with memorials of broken hearts?"

The heart that has been often and deeply wounded, instinctively seeks to protect itself, shrinks from every chance rude touch; and so it had been with Avice, long. Now Mr. Vernon was probing her to the quick. Not her head only, but her whole being drooped now. A prolonged, wailing cry seemed to escape her spirit, sounding there as an autumn gale sounds at night while sweeping across a naked and dreary shore. So she sat for a time, helpless, voiceless.

Mr. Vernon had withdrawn his hand from hers, and now he leaned back in his chair, resting his chin on his clasped and withered hands, and looking a very impersonation of despair.

“God help us!” he exclaimed at length, “it is as I feared—as I knew it must be—and what remains for us to do? Say that you forgive me, and let me die! I can only be a coward at last, and leave you alone with the desolation I have created!”

It was indeed as he feared if he meant to say, he feared that the possession of wealth could not bring happiness to Avice. The day for that had gone by. Happy she might become, but not through Mr. Vernon’s means. But she could not accuse him as he accused himself; his self-abasement troubled and grieved her, and while pitying him, she could half forget herself. She had shed no tears, but when she rose and bent over his chair, her face was cold and white as marble.

“My friend,” she said, “let us hope that God will help us—help us to use well and wisely what time may remain to us. With my whole heart and soul I forgive (if the word must be spoken) your omissions as far as I am concerned. You never did me, or any belonging to me, intentional wrong. Surely it must be consolatory to you, to know that, to the best of your ability, you have striven to repair your past

errors. As for me, I do indeed feel rather the need of kind friends than of riches, and you must not think of leaving me yet awhile ; you must allow me to become as a daughter to you now."

" Surely you inherit all Mary's loving spirit, as well as her gentle voice," said Mr. Vernon, opening his arms and receiving her in an embrace. " May a higher blessing than mine rest upon you, my dear child, and yet I also venture to bless you ! So long as I live we must not part again—not for a day, promise me."

Avice promised, and again placed herself at his feet.

" We will go down to Stanley Place together," he said, laying his hand on her head caressingly, " it will please you to see the old haunted tower and the dark hanging wood once again. The tower remains as it was—I would not allow it to be touched, for your sake. A white owl still has its dwelling in the thick ivy, and the mansion and whole domain are your own now, Avice—yours and your child's. Ah, how I rejoice that you have a daughter ! She shall be to me as a dear grandchild, and through my remaining days I shall feel, for the first time,

that I have a home upon earth ! I know that I shall be grateful for happiness so undeserved !”

He again leaned back in his chair and closed his eyes ; he appeared so tranquillized that Avice did not disturb him. Presently tears broke from his eyes and coursed fast down his furrowed and sunken cheeks, and Avice allowed him to weep on.

It was a touching sight to see one so near the grave weeping as he wept now ; but his tears were not all bitter, and they were refreshing to his soul. For the first time in his life he was shedding tears of thankfulness : and when he spoke, at length, he said he knew that he had made his peace with heaven.

And everything he afterwards said afforded evidence that he had undergone a happy change. In the course of conversation the Countess de Torres was mentioned.

“ You remind me altogether of Mary,” he said ; “ you can forgive much because you love much. For years past I have felt that I should not be able to endure Clementina’s presence, as I could not endure that of some others. I have presumed to say so, forgetting what a sinner I

myself was. Walter, who never ^{will} be able to endure it, may take his own high stand, and throughout all command our admiration. He has been noble in nature, upright in principle from the commencement of his life until now. I never knew a character so altogether grand and perfect as Walter Osborne's is. He has his failings, because he is human ; but they are the failings of a great mind and heart ; and no man can say he has been wronged by them, and no woman. He never could, and never did mix himself up with what is called society, where hollow hearts and vacant minds, vanity and deceit, and the miserable littlenesses of exclusiveness, all ending in chagrin and satiety, abound above everything else. I, on the contrary, gave up my whole life to that smallest and meanest of worlds, worthy alone of its creator—man. I tolerated without effort the continual presence about me of men and women, in no respect superior to the Countess de Torres and Lady Otley. Therefore, I have no pretence for shrinking from any now. Bid your sister welcome here ; it is right that you should cleave to her, as you say ; that you should help her necessities—that you should draw her heart to

you if that is possible. ‘Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy.’”

In the course of conversation Avice learned how strong was the attachment of Mr. Vernon to Walter Osborne. With the garrulosity of an old man, he dwelt upon his many noble qualities, his professional ability and renown, his oratorical powers, his genius as a writer, both of prose and verse, though he had published little —nothing but what he gave to the public with a public purpose. Avice had heard something of this at Burnham, but not all; she had never understood how really eminent he had become in many ways. No periodical had ever reached Burnham, for Edward Thorpe was a self-centred man, whose individual opinions and possessions, and plans sufficed to him, so that he systematically put the world aside, and expected all about him to do the same. If a stray newspaper found its way to the secluded little house, it was by chance, and because Edward Thorpe had occasion to refer to it at his leisure. And no greater proof could have been afforded of Avice’s unfitness for her lot altogether, than her entire and silent acquiescence in whatever was decreed for her, never varied by complaint or

the expression of a wish, or any independent exertion of will. This meagre life, less than half a life; her never-sleeping memories; her later disappointments of the heart; the wild scenery and vast solitude amid which she dwelt, had all tended to produce the extreme development of an originally imaginative nature. In her love or admiration, Avice would have been an enthusiast in her girlhood, but she was much more of an enthusiast now. Warmly regarding, admiring, honouring Mr. Osborne as she had done, she unconsciously allowed these feelings to merge into one of almost idolatrous attachment, so entire was it, so all-pervading, so sufficing, where all beside was yet barren to her as ever. Never had partial, talkative old man so attentive and interested a listener as Mr. Vernon found in her while speaking of his distinguished friend. And with reason—for he had to speak to Avice of this friend's undying affection for Phillip; of his almost life-long anxiety about herself. He had to tell her that this anxiety—what Mr. Osborne knew of her hard usage by others—what he dreaded for her in the life of which he might know nothing—had made him a much sterner man than he would have been,

had he been allowed to minister to her happiness as he wished.

"In one respect, all may yet be as I have wished, hoped, prayed that it might," continued Mr. Vernon. "Why should it not? No truer friend than Walter Osborne will ever cross your path in life. When I die, he will be your sole protector. Happiness for him, happiness for both, at last—or less than nothing! My one prayer, my one prayer! Will it be answered? You cannot understand me yet, dear child; I must yet pray in secret for a while, and watch, and wait."

But Avice understood. Her conscious heart only too readily seized upon his meaning. Loving now, for the first time, and worthily, and with the intensity of which she was capable, she might not deceive herself. This one chance of happiness remained for her, and none other. The world, a desert to her before, would be altogether insupportable to her if she chanced to lose Mr. Osborne—lose him as the friend and brother to whom she was more than any other might be. She had more than once wondered whether Walter Osborne, while so scrupulously striving to carry out some of Phillip's

wishes, ever thought of that *one* wish expressed in the presence of both, and so nearly concerning both. Had he not himself said that his life might have been very different, have been happier, better, if she had remained at his side? Did he not declare, prove, that he was happy now because she was restored to him? O wildly throbbing, and perhaps too-trusting heart, be still! What a true pride it would be for her at last to take her place by this noble man's side, in sight of the whole world! What a paradise Stanley Place might yet become to her, with him for its master! How truly noble a father he would be to Lydia! and with all the advantages that would be within her reach, how greatly Lydia might improve! O wildly throbbing, and perhaps too-trusting heart, be still! The bright side of the picture was very glorious, and it was turned full upon her now. Her trembling, agitated happiness, worked visibly; it gave colour to her cheeks, and lustre to her eyes.

It must not be supposed that Mr. Vernon got through his long explanation without many interruptions; and the great effort he had made left him utterly and alarmingly exhausted.

Avice's sorrow at the prospect of soon losing this now very dear friend was heightened on learning, as she soon did, that his care for her comfort and happiness, and eager desire to behold her once more, had certainly hastily broken up his remaining powers.

The fatigue of hurrying from Stanley Place, immediately on receiving Mr. Osborne's communication, in order to prepare his town-house for Avice's reception, and a severe cold, caught while superintending the latter work, added to great excitement of mind, had told visibly on him. But Mr. Vernon had been allowed to live until he had accomplished the one wish of his heart: he had been allowed to find peace in time, and for him nothing remained but to die. Tranquilly as a tired child lies down to sleep, he underwent the great change; and within a week after the arrival of Avice in Curzon Street, passers outside knew that death had taken possession of the long-deserted house.

CHAPTER VI

THE death of this new-found friend, whom she had already begun to love, struck a chill to the heart of Avice. Not because of its suddenness, for there was nothing remarkable in that, "considering his great age; and not altogether because of the real grief his loss occasioned her, hastened by his care for her as it had been. The event excited her in a distressing way; her nerves received a severe shock; her too vivid imagination construed it into an evil omen; and for a time she could not shake off a presentiment of failure on every side. Rich as she had now become in externals, she had never felt so near that utter bankruptcy of heart and hope that yields without further struggle.

The Countess de Torres, on the contrary, was in ecstacies. Mr. Vernon had bequeathed her nothing; but she foresaw that Avice would fall

into her hands for a time at least, perhaps altogether, and she felt sure that she could manage Avice to her own advantage. For the present, she was secure of living in the luxurious style that alone suited her; and none could be more conscious of the benefit to herself of being so nearly allied to so important a personage as Mr. Vernon's heiress was sure to become. Certainly it was a very absurd thing, laughable, if it had not been so lamentable, to lavish such immense wealth on so poor a creature as Avice, who of herself could neither appreciate nor put it to any proper use; but next to her own, the Countess acknowledged that it could not have fallen into better hands than Avice's.

Seeing that Avice was utterly prostrated (very properly, she acknowledged alo ud, while mentally wondering whether she really felt anything at all), the Countess took the charge of ordering everything in the household upon herself; and to begin with, she advised the immediate retreat of the family to Stanley Place. The usages of high life required that a house visited by death should be immediately deserted by the relatives, or nearest connexions of the deceased; and the Countess trusted that Mr. Vernon's remains

would not be denied this mark of distinguished consideration. But Avice, who had many plebeian notions, rejected this advice in so decided a manner that the Countess was a little astonished. Avice remained in Curzon Street a week after the funeral had taken place ; and then, accompanied by Mr. Osborne and those comprising her household, she took her departure for her old home in Worcestershire.

Still reserving to herself the pleasure of affording Lydia a great surprise, she did not, in her letters, give the slightest hint of her changed fortunes. She still gave her address at the Gloves, who forwarded her letters. And she had not been idle during that last week in London.

She and Mr. Osborne together had visited Phillip's grave at Kensington, over which a substantial monument had been placed by his friend ; and Blanche's grave at St. John's Wood, from which she would not have removed the humble head-stone, erected by Edward Thorpe, for the world. And, together, the two paid a visit to the shop of Mr. Simpson, whom they found still flourishing in Oxford Street ; still tumbling his hair like one distracted ; still

craving for capital to throw into the business. Both Mr. Simpson and his wife recognized her at once, and for her part, she was astonished to see how little they had changed. Mr. Simpson ought to have worried himself to death long ago, yet here he was, brisk as ever, and apparently anxious as ever. Nay, more anxious than ever; for late in life the Simpsons had been blest with a son, now eight years old, and the excitable little draper did not yet seem to have got over the astonishment caused by this unexpected addition to his ordinary cares. Avice sat for an hour in the well-remembered parlour, giving the two some account of the last days of their Aunt Ritson, of whose death she had apprised them at the time it occurred; receiving in return the only letter that was ever addressed to her at Burnham.

Then she spoke of the old times when she had dwelt with them; and they declared that they had missed her when she was gone, and often spoke together about her and the poor young lady who died, and that good, kind Mr. Thorpe. Finally, Avice visited the room in which Blanche died, and placed in Mr. Simpson's hands, at parting, a small packet which she had de-

signed as a present to himself, but now spoke of as a gift to his son. The packet, folded and sealed by Mr. Osborne, contained notes to the amount of a thousand pounds, and a letter explaining that this sum was due to the heirs of Mary Ritson, from the family she had so long and faithfully served.

With her vivid recollection of the desolate old mansion in Worcestershire, its immense, scantily furnished apartments, its long, naked corridors, its dilapidated doors and windows, its neglected grounds, a very wilderness of weeds and underwood that choked up every space between the old trees ; Avice was astonished when she beheld Stanley Place as it was now, after being repaired and decorated, and enriched by Mr. Vernon. She had expected that it would no longer wear that familiar and unmistakeable aspect of poverty ; but what had become of those spacious rooms that her father used to say would hold half-a-dozen regiments ; of those vast corridors, famous for their echoes, among which she had lost herself many a time when a little child ? Everything appeared to have dwindled—even outside ? Could those be the giant trees she remembered, shewing so

stark now on the smoothly shaven greensward ? That crowding of rich furniture and costly ornament within—of carpets and draperies, and pictures—statues, busts, books by thousands, and curiosities of all descriptions, as in the town-house, accounted in some measure for the missing spaciousness there ; but what about those trees, and the height and breadth of the mansion outside ? Had her imagination magnified everything in the past, even the lost love, causing her to do injustice to the later love she had found ? Ah, no ! that could not be. But how strange everything seemed to her !

In the evening, and while the Countess was still engaged in exploring the apartments and expressing her high admiration of everything around her, Avice, in search of some further satisfaction for herself, found her way to one of her old haunts.

Miss Deane delivered to her the key of the door that opened from an obscure passage upon the upper, and only remaining, chamber of the old tower. When there, she locked herself in as she sometimes used to do, and then looked around. Through the rents in the crumbling walls, through the window with its ornamented stone

framework, now almost filled up with ivy, fell streams of the clear moonlight ; revealing to her the interior, which her familiar eye took in at once.

Nothing was changed here. Grass and green moss still flourished luxuriantly wherever the broken flags of the flooring lay apart, and covered the heap of grey granite that at some remote period had fallen inward from the walls, and been suffered to lie where it fell ; and the wide fire-place, with its carved armorial bearings above, and the flight of time-worn steps leading to the roof, looked just as they used to look. Mounting to the roof, she still readily recognized everything around her. The rank growths of many kinds, the luxuriant ivy, the turrets half-broken away, and lo ! the white owl ! Not her own white owl of the old days that was familiar with her presence, and never disturbed itself on her account, but a much smaller one, that now recognized her as an intruder, and set up a loud hooting, and shook the ivy as it wheeled away in heavy flight over the tops of the trees. Looking below and above, everything reminded her of the days that were gone ; the serene sky lighted up by its brilliant moon ; the ancient

church tower shewing in the distance ; the wood, that on this side seemed to have retained its primeval wilderness.

Avice's thoughts inevitably wandered to the kind friend whose care for herself had prevented any one feature of this spot being changed, and dwelt on him until tears blinded her eyes. But presently her thoughts were all with the past. Crowding around her, carrying her whole soul away as with an impetuous flood, came back whatever in that past had formed a part of her being. Her strong home affections—her romantic veneration for the relics of past days—her happy dreams of a bright future for all she loved—her revellings in the world of poetry and imagination—every old ballad that she was wont to repeat—every fine poem or poetic passage stored up by Phillip or herself—every tale of romance and chivalry that she had read and identified herself with—rushed upon her recollection now, completing the illusion to which she readily yielded herself. Was the interval between that day and this anything more than a dream ? Alas for the sore, uncertain, agitated heart, that might not long deceive itself !

Yielding herself in this way to the old memo-

ries, Avice yet put off sending for her daughter for some days. She wished once more to visit all the familiar haunts before the realities of the present crowded upon her too closely. The Countess observed this inclination with silent contempt, but some real satisfaction.

It suited her very well that Avice should remain as much of a dreamer as ever—as incapable as ever of entering into the spirit of worldliness that alone actuated herself. It suited her well, except that Mr. Osborne accompanied Avice in all her rambles, and was indeed never absent from her side; for she now heartily wished that this connection might be broken off.

It was natural that these two friends, who loved Phillip almost alike, should linger together amongst the old scenes, made familiar to one of them by Phillip's descriptions; and no consecrated spot was left unexplored by them now. And Avice was continually being startled by some revelation from Walter Osborne that proved to her how much of Phillip's heart had been laid bare to his friend, and how absorbing had been his thought of herself. Together they explored every nook of the old church, and stood beside

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Colonel Desborough's grave, and sat long on the tomb of the crusader, conversing of the ancient days. Together they lingered on the roof of the old tower, where none had before ever stood with Avice, save her father and Phillip. What wonder was it that, day by day, her heart cleaved more inalienably to Walter Osborne ?

Avice had become liable to interruptions that at first occasioned her surprise. Many opulent and distinguished families resided in the neighbourhood ; and the heiress of Mr. Vernon was a visitable personage, and accordingly visited. In this way she was made acquainted with Lord and Lady Staines, and their son, the Honourable Edmund Staines ; Sir James Dunstone, his wife and three daughters, and his son, Captain Dunstone ; Mr. Clements, a bachelor and rich land-owner ; and several others, of lesser note, but perhaps equal pretensions, who were one and all charmed with their new neighbour, and determined to cultivate her acquaintance to the utmost. Avice saw this determination, and considered with dismay, that perhaps her large means rendered it incumbent on her to be hospitable amongst her neighbours ; but she felt, at the same time, that such a burden was not to

be borne, if *one* all-sustaining presence was withdrawn from her. Alas ! here was another change from the early days ! No wealthy neighbour had ever so besieged the door of the dilapidated mansion in which dwelt the impoverished Colonel Desborough ! Avice knew that poverty had its blessings : she had yet to learn what were the recompenses for wealth.

Avice's friendly neighbours were charmed with her, as we have said. They discovered, in their way and at once, all the good qualities that still remained hidden from the Misses Thorpe. One and all declared that Mrs. Thorpe was very handsome—very distinguished in manner—very much superior to her sister, the Countess de Torres, who was, nevertheless, a fine woman. People began to speculate about her ; to wonder whether that dark-looking and scarcely courteous Mr. Osborne had any design in being so attentive as he certainly was to her.

The rich bachelor predicted that the pretty, little, wealthy widow would soon be snapped up ; and the Honourable Edmund Staines and Captain Dunstone, who had two wants in common—money and brains—decided, by the tossing up of a sovereign, which should first lay a

determined siege to her heart. The lot fell upon the Honourable, who forthwith pulled up his collar and declared himself ready to commence operations.

Avice decided upon fetching her daughter herself, and the day was fixed. Mr. Osborne wished to accompany her, and could not—and left her to guess why; for his own unhappy family history was a subject on which he might not enter even with Avice. But he superintended all the arrangements for her journey, and showed himself anxious and attentive as ever.

He insisted on her taking Miss Deane with her, and travelling in her own carriage, which could be conveyed forward by rail to within a short distance of Selby.

He himself intended to return to London for a few days, but he promised to come back at the end of the week, when he could make a longer stay; for he was anxious to become acquainted with Lydia. It so chanced that Lydia's letter announcing the death of Miss Thorpe arrived on the very evening that these arrangements were completed, so that all was in readiness for departure on the following day. Mr.

Osborne accompanied the travellers some miles, as far as the station from which they were to proceed ; and after making arrangements for the conveyance of the carriage, and once more giving strict charges to the two men-servants, he saw the ladies seated. In the midst of a great crowd, confused by the din of ringing bells, the rushing to and fro of porters, and the shrieks of the engine, Avice took leave of Mr. Osborne.

Why did this brief separation trouble her so much that her heart was too full for speech, and her tears scarcely to be restrained ? Why ! was she not parting with her only friend on the wide earth ? she who had learned to know what parting *might* be ! A lingering pressure of the hand, a glowing look of regard, a fervent “God bless you !” and Mr. Osborne was gone. Every moment was widening the distance between them.

CHAPTER VII.

DURING the course of the same week a family dinner-party enlivened the now usually dull house in Brook Street. The invited guests were the Dowager Lady Otley's brother, the Dean, just returned from some foreign spa which he had visited for the benefit of his health ; the same lady's nephew, the present Earl of Stunnington ; her son and his lady (a very strong-minded woman, who managed his weaknesses without humouring them), and her married daughter, the Amelia who had been designed for Mr. Osborne, and who had since become the wife of a poor baronet's second son.

Those amongst these personages who have already been introduced to the reader, were essentially the same personages, making due

allowance for much visible wear and tear. Two of the dowager's daughters were dead, and the eldest, now upwards of forty, resided with her.

It was acknowledged by every member of the family that Otley's wife was a woman of extraordinary talent. Her superior worldly knowledge and tact not only enabled her to keep in order, and out of harm's way, a husband whose weakness of character and limited intellect unfitted him for acting on his own responsibility, but so to manage a small income as to make the greatest possible show with it. Her influence did not rest there, and when it suited her purpose, she found it an easy matter to manage others of her husband's family. For instance, it had suited her that this dinner should take place, and it took place accordingly ; and the dowager was not aware that the idea had not originated with herself. Of course Lady Otley never did anything without an object, and her object in the present instance was to elicit, if possible, from the united statements and admissions of those assembled, some clearer information respecting the former relations of the family with Mr. Osborne and Mr. Vernon's heiress than she had yet been able to arrive at.

In furtherance of her object, she had taken measures for keeping the Dean in ignorance of Mr. Vernon's death, until she chose that he should receive the intelligence. She had always paid great court to the Dean, who being a bachelor and wealthy, gave promise of one day repaying the attentions she lavished upon him. The Dean was fond of flattery and good living; and she was at great pains to minister to his vanity and his appetite, and, in consequence, became a favourite.

Nothing, therefore, was more natural than that her anxiety should lead her to pounce upon the Dean immediately on his arrival from the Spa, and conduct him to her own house, where, as she said, he would be sure to receive the constant attention that the present delicate state of his health required. The Dean, who was at least equally anxious about his health, liked the arrangement very well, knowing from experience that he could not fall into better hands. So Lady Otley nursed him, and read the papers to him, and took care that he was supplied with his favourite dishes; took care, above all things, that he was kept in a pleasant frame of mind, which was the avowed reason for withholding from him the

intelligence of Mr. Vernon's death. The family acquiesced in the propriety of these precautions, and when the dinner-party was arranged, and Lady Otley declared that his absence would cast a gloom on the spirits of all concerned, the Dean acquiesced in the propriety of making an effort and gracing it with his presence.

The dinner passed off very well. The Dean, who was now upwards of seventy, and more corpulent than ever, if somewhat less red in the face, and very wheezy and short of breath, enjoyed himself very much, and ate and drank very heartily, in defiance of the injunctions of his physicians ; for he was seated next to Lady Otley, and was not Lady Otley his nurse, and did she not make a point of taking every possible care of him, and was she not ministering to his temporal wants in a truly Christian-like manner ?

Lady Otley's only fear was that he would fall asleep immediately after dinner ; so she caused a speedy retreat to the drawing-room, and there dosed him with a strong cup of coffee. That cup of coffee was Lord Otley's cue. Suddenly, and to the amazement of all, he blurted out this speech :—

"Uncle, we've some news that will surprise you; old Vernon's dead, at last; and who do you think—"

"Well, I never saw anything like you, Otley!" exclaimed his wife, flying to the Dean's side (she had purposely left sufficient space between them to produce effect.) "After all the pains I have taken to prevent my uncle being disturbed, it is too bad of you to be so abrupt! It ought to have been left to me to break this intelligence."

"Why, how was I to do it?" asked Lord Otley, looking the injured man he was;—for was he not acting in obedience to his wife's instructions?—and was he not on the point of proclaiming this fact more openly, when the latter stopped him?

"Now say no more—let me speak. You will be exceedingly interested, uncle, when you hear all the particulars," she continued, adjusting a pillow for the Dean, who had suddenly become more than ordinarily short of breath and red in the face. "You know how exceedingly rich Mr. Vernon was—what valuable property of all descriptions he had to bequeath. Just try to guess whom he fixed

upon' for a heir at last. Now none of you speak a word."

"Really I—a—I shall be most happy to congratulate any one of this present company, if, as—a—as is not improbable, he has seen fit to remember my nephew or nieces as the nearest connections of—a—the late Miss de Burgh."

The Earl shrugged his shoulders. Lord Otley looked more than ordinarily foolish, and his two sisters coughed simultaneously. The dowager, who had shrivelled in greater proportion than her brother had fattened, but who retained all [•] her vapid manner, said simpering—

"Oh, Henry! you must really guess again!"

"Then—a—you must allow me to say," said the Dean, pompously, and evidently out of humour, "that I do not see how the matter concerns me at all."

"Only because it is so very odd, you know, uncle," said Lady Otley. "At least it seems very odd to me, because I understand that when he made his will he did not know that the person he bequeathed his property to was living. Well, he has left everything to a daughter of Colonel Desborough, who bears the very common name of Mrs. Thorpe."

"Ha!" said the Dean, wonderfully roused for him, "what! that Avice who took herself off in such a strange way, and altogether conducted herself so extravagantly and oddly—if—a—if my memory does not deceive me—nearly twenty years ago? Is this what I am to understand?"

He was assured on all sides that this was what he was to understand.

"This is very extraordinary indeed," said the Dean. "I—a—I must be allowed to say I don't at all comprehend it. If my memory does not fail me, there was something disreputable connected with—a—with that young person. In fact—"

"In fact she was most disreputably poor—and unprotected," interrupted the Earl.

"She was the most obstinate, artful creature that ever lived," said Miss Otley, sharply. "Mamma and I know all about it."

Lady Otley opened her ears, and her keen glance took note of the expression of every countenance.

"She certainly did behave very ill to me," said the dowager, "but I have forgiven her long ago. I was really glad to hear of her good fortune."

"As a Christian, that is quite proper," said the Dean. "But it may—a—be a question whether it is right to renew the—a—the close intimacy that, if my memory does not fail me, was interrupted by some extraordinary conduct on her part."

"It may be a question whether she will submit to a renewal of the close intimacy of which you speak," said the Earl, stretching his legs and yawning.

"That's just what I was thinking," said Lord Otley, in his eager, hurried way, and looking proud, as he was, of having anticipated a pretty obvious sentiment.

"I have indeed great reason to believe that she will be vindictive," said the dowager. "Our poor human nature is so weak that some, when they are conscious of having done wrong, seek to excuse themselves by setting up a complaint of injurious treatment from the individual wronged. I should not be in the least surprised if Mrs.—I forget her name—so complained of me."

"I am glad to hear you say so," observed the Earl. "It is well to be prepared in all cases."

"And she really conducted herself in so improper a manner!" exclaimed Lady Otley. "I never rightly understood all the circumstances."

"My dear, I have told you that I have forgiven her," said the dowager. "Far be it from me to expose her faults now."

"Right—quite right," muttered the Dean, who was beginning to doze. "For what we are going to—a—I mean, Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive them that trespass against us."

"But, my dear aunt, you know that I'm a great stickler for fair play," said the Earl, folding his arms with an evident determination to pursue the subject. "I was myself no chicken when Phillip Desborough and Miss De Burgh died; and the two events disturbed me a little, though I was as thoughtless a young puppy as any about town. If my memory does not fail me, as my uncle has it, the great charge brought against Avice Desborough at that time was a real or supposed inclination on her part to inveigle the affections of Walter Osborne, whose allegiance, somehow or other, appeared to be due to my cousin Amelia."

"To me!" shrieked Amelia. "Oh, James!

when everybody knows I couldn't endure the sight of the brute!"

"I am ready to admit that fact and maintain my position," continued the Earl, who alone, amongst those present, saw Lady Otley's object, and determined to humour her. Besides, he was naturally inclined to be generous; as he had told his aunt he was really a great stickler for fair play. So he went on thus:—

"An idea did some way gain ground that Walter Osborne was attached to you—or ought to be. It turned out to be a mistake, but there it was. I declare that I considered the match to be quite a settled thing—so did Otley. Speak out like a man, Otley. Was it so or not?"

"Why, yes—that is, I think—Oh yes, certainly—I'm sure I thought so at the time," said Lord Otley, hurriedly and confusedly.

"I see!" was Lady Otley's mental observation; "they were too eager for the match, and over-did everything. What bad management! but so like them!"

"Very well," said the Earl. "Now the next question is, was not that young girl's chief offence a supposed design upon Osborne's person and property? Did you or did you not, Otley,

believe with me that she was a heinous offender in this one respect, and no other that could at all compare with it?"

"I think so," said Lord Otley. "Stop! there was something else, I'm sure; something about her running off with all my aunt's property. Oh, that was it! I recollect now; she ran off with all the property, you know."

"And took care to keep out of our reach," said Miss Otley. "We positively never heard a word from her."

"Thank you for that admission," said the Earl. "Take my word for it that you were labouring under a mistake in supposing that there was any property to run off with. Miss de Burgh was never rich—she died poor. Now what does this young girl do, who, upon my soul, I have often wished I had sought out myself and married? She did not trouble you, as you acknowledge; she did not pursue her designs upon Walter Osborne, if she had ever entertained any. She disappeared altogether, and turned up only the other day, as a respectable widow. As far as I can understand, this is the long and the short of it."

"You fancy you know all the particulars, and

therefore seem inclined to throw blame upon me, James," said the dowager.

"Nay, hang it, I have no wish to fix blame on any one; I have merely striven to lighten it in a certain quarter," said the Earl. "Fair play is my motto, aunt, all the world over."

By this time the Dean was snoring unmistakeably; snoring as only a very stout, luxuriously-fed, short-necked man can snore; noisily, hardly, at intervals alarmingly. The Earl alone did not bear this infliction well, and he proposed that his uncle should be roused.

The rest, however, declared that the Dean must not be disturbed for the world, and so his motion was overruled.

"Dear me, James," said Amelia, laughing lightly, "if you really have seriously thought of marrying this lady, why not propose to her now? Surely with her large fortune she must be additionally attractive."

"I am not so sure of that," said the Earl; "besides, I am not a marrying man."

"It always grieves me to hear you say so," remarked the dowager. "You are singularly indifferent about the succession."

"Don't say indifferent, aunt, I feel particu-

larly safe on that score, it is true. By Jove, my brother, with his half score children, leaves me nothing to fear ! And, to be candid with you, I consider my nephew Richard to be a fine fellow ; and I could not find in my heart to cut him out."

" Besides, if report can be relied on, Mr. Osborne himself is now paying singular attention to the widow," said Miss Otley. " So you see there must be some truth in what was said of her in her young days. She is ready enough to catch him at last, I daresay."

" I don't see that at all," said the Earl. " On the contrary, I feel sure that Osborne would never tolerate near him the woman who, as a girl, laid herself out for his admiration."

" For my part, I hope she'll get him ; I'm sure she's quite welcome to him," said Amelia, tossing her head. " The coarse, bearish man ! what a tyrant of a husband he'll be !"

" He's a noble fellow," said the Earl heartily. " I'd give a dozen such heads as mine for his brains."

" And so would I," said Lord Otley ; " I would, indeed. There's everybody saying how clever he is."

"If he marries Mrs. Thorpe, how immensely rich the two will be!" remarked Lady Otley.

"No doubt about that," said the Earl.

"And I understand," continued the lady, "that Mrs. Thorpe has a daughter, almost grown up, on whom all the Vernon property is settled. If Mr. Osborne marries the mother, it is not unlikely that his property also will descend to this girl."

"Very probable, I should say," said the Earl, who remembered that Lady Otley had a brother whose poverty rendered it desirable that he should seek a rich wife.

"I must say that Avice has been extraordinarily fortunate," said the dowager. "Whoever would have thought of this twenty years ago! I understand that the Countess de Torres is staying with her down at Stanley Place. Certainly the Countess de Torres is under great obligation to me and mine."

"Oh, mamma, never look for gratitude!" said Miss Otley.

"But I have a right to expect gratitude from her," persisted the dowager. "If I had not noticed her, if Otley had not patronised her first husband, what would have become of her?"

I cannot suppose that she will deny being deeply indebted to us."

"I'm sure she spoke as gratefully as could be when I saw her in Paris," said Lord Otley. "I told you so; but you all made a piece of work about my visiting her. Then you all determined to cut her when she came to England. What could I do?"

"There were certainly some tales abroad to her disadvantage," said Lady Otley, "but doubtless they were exaggerated. I begin to feel that that there must have been a little misconception somewhere. This can readily be explained away. As to any differences that existed years ago, I of course cannot be supposed to have anything to do with them; and considering that the Countess is now a stranger in England, that Mrs. Thorpe is new to society; that, in fact, both of them are nearly related to the family, I think it right that I should offer them any services in my power. I shall certainly call upon them when they return to town."

"My dear, that will be very kind of you," said the dowager. "The Countess will perfectly understand all the advantages to be derived from such a connection."

"You can act as you please, certainly," said Amelia, "I shall beg leave to keep aloof."

"Oh, Amelia, be forgiving!" whimpered the dowager, with tears in her eyes. "You see that I set you the example. It is indeed a heavenly privilege to forgive!"

"God bless me!" exclaimed the Earl, starting nervously.

A sudden gurgling in the Dean's throat, that occasioned him to struggle convulsively, and become purple in the face, was the cause of the Earl's alarm. This was the usual manner in which the Dean shook off his slumbers. When he was wide awake, his niece explained to him her intention, which received his entire approval. He approved on entirely Christian principles, setting aside sundry considerations that might have interfered if he had not felt with his sister that it was a blessed privilege to forgive injuries.

CHAPTER VIII.

CATHERINE MOORE TO GRACE LEE.

“ Staunton Court, November 17, 18—.

“ You complain, dear Grace, that my letters have of late been very meagre, that I no longer open my whole heart to you as heretofore. You say that having interested you so deeply in the fate and fortunes of the various individuals I have introduced to your notice, it is cruel in me to withhold from you the further information I myself doubtless possess. I plead guilty to all these charges. I confess that I have almost regretted having revealed so much, so much remaining to be told over which my heart sickens. Oh, Grace, I am wrongly situated here. I feel humiliated. And yet I sometimes think that a special providence sent me here. At any

rate, I will not yet desert my post; and, as far as I can, I will try to gratify you.

"A few days after my return to Staunton Court, Mrs. Rycroft spoke to me very confidentially about her daughter. Elizabeth was very self-willed, she said—had been so from a child. In defiance of the disapprobation of both parents, she has received and encouraged the addresses of a broken-down gentleman of the neighbourhood, a certain George Liddell, whom I find to be the brother of that sweet Mary Liddell who will shortly, I suspect, become the wife of Lawrence Trevor. This George Liddell is, for some reason or other, over and above his poverty, an object of especial dislike to Mr. Rycroft; and the worst feature of the matter is, that Elizabeth declares she should never have thought of him seriously if such violent opposition had not set in; and that now she will marry him in spite of it, though she really does not care a straw about him. It is the belief of both Mr. and Mrs. Rycroft that the Trevors encourage this intimacy; and that Charles, especially, aids and abets it by the carrying to and fro of letters and messages. The latter surmise is likely enough to be true; for that scapegrace Charles would think he

was only acting a friendly part; but I am quite sure that no member of his family is aware of his misdoings of this kind. Mrs. Rycroft's object in confiding all this to me was to induce me to remonstrate with Elizabeth on her folly and undutifulness; and also to keep a strict watch over her and Charles Trevor, and report whatever I might see amiss. I surprised and offended Mrs. Rycroft by immediately declining both offices. She said something that amounted to telling me that in return for Mr. Rycroft's great kindness in placing me in a much higher position than I had ever occupied before, I ought to consider it my duty to serve him and his family to the utmost of my power, and in any way that was pointed out to me. This did not alter my determination.

“To do Mrs. Rycroft justice, her anger is not more lasting than her fits of graciousness. On the following morning she invited me to take a drive with herself and Miss Osborne, whose maid, or keeper, accompanied us. In this order we went out during several successive days, until at length Mrs. Rycroft trusted me to go without her. I thought I discovered a gleam of satisfaction on Miss Osborne's countenance

when first she became aware of this arrangement. Every day now I accompany her in her drives; and, though the grim woman by whom we are accompanied keeps a strict watch over us, we have certainly established a friendly communication with the help of our eyes. Shall I confess more to you, Grace? I have been with Miss Osborne in her room alone. I have spoken with her. I have heard from her lips the full sentences that have so frequently struggled there for free utterance. 'My husband! My child! My brother!' Pardon me, Grace, if I say nothing more on this subject at present.

"I make full use of the privileges allowed me, in consideration of my acknowledged independence of character—or means. I make frequent visits to the cottage of Mrs. Hallett, and am always received by herself and Gervase with the liveliest expressions of joy. No further communication has passed between her and myself, but her eyes frequently make eager inquiries, and I fancy that mine inspire her with confidence in reply. The man Hallett has been seen skulking about, but, happily, he has not as yet invaded the quiet in which his wife and her reputed son now dwell.

“ I also pay frequent visits to the Trevors. Indeed, they claim me as one of the family, and I cannot tell you how ready I am to admit the claim. I love them all; the more, the more I see of them. Theirs is the sterling worth and goodness that grows upon you. Jane Trevor, especially, seems to cling to me; and Charles is not to be disabused of the idea that in some way or degree I am certainly related to himself, and he now regularly addresses me as ‘ Cousin Catherine.’

“ You will remember what I told you of a certain Mrs. Thorpe, whose acquaintance I at one time hoped to make. It seems to me that some good genii has recognised her worth, and heaped all kinds of favours upon her, and finally flown away with her. The story told here is this :

“ In reply to the letter summoning her to Moorlands, on the death of the elder Miss Thorpe, she duly made her appearance, travelling in her own carriage—quite a stylish affair, and accompanied by two servants in mourning liveries and a lady who also seemed to be a kind of attendant or humble friend. The little village of Thorne was thrown into great commotion by the

appearance of this grand equipage, its mistress and her servitors, never having witnessed the like before. Mrs. Thorpe informed her sisters that in London she had met with an old friend of her family, who died during her stay there, bequeathing to her the whole of his large fortune. Also that she now resided at a stately mansion, formerly belonging to her own family, and situated in one of the inland counties.

“ Of course she had come with the intention of taking her daughter away with her. But the best of all this is to come.

“ The inhabitants of Thorne are loud in their praises of her graciousness, and friendliness, and beneficence. Scarcely one of them was left unbenefitted by her visit. She left a large sum for the rebuilding of the parsonage-house, the present one having been long in a ruinous condition, and promised to supply the church with an organ. It was the same at Burnham ; and she remained three or four days ‘ going about doing good.’ She especially gladdened the hearts of the Misses Thorpe, by giving them entire possession of Moorlands, and enabling them to add to the farm several adjoining acres of land, which they had long coveted, and which she obtained by

offering an enormous price. And the Misses Thorpe speak proudly of their sister-in-law now; of her grandeur and high connexions; of her attachment to themselves; of her wonderfully improved personal appearance; for they own that she quite startled them, she had grown so handsome.

“ In the spring the younger sister is to pay her a long visit; and in the meantime, both seem inclined to make the most of this great addition to their importance.

“ The Misses Winstay and other acquaintances complain that the Misses Thorpe are becoming insufferably proud; and it is remembered against them that until this change in her circumstances took place, they were in the constant habit of every way depreciating the wife and widow of their brother. As you may suppose these events have caused a great sensation in the neighbourhood.

“ I encountered many blank looks while the subject was being discussed. People regretted that they had not made her acquaintance; Mrs. Rycroft was especially chagrined, for *she* might have patronised Mrs. Thorpe, and did not. She said this before Mr. Trevor; and he smiled in

his quiet way, and observed, ' That Mrs. Thorpe had at all times been quite as inaccessible as now. It was her husband's wish that she should live in entire seclusion ; and she respected his wishes even when she became a widow.' After all that I have heard of her, I cannot help regretting that she is now beyond my reach.

" You think, dear Grace, that Mr. Osborne ought to be made acquainted with all the circumstances that have come to my knowledge. Surely, he already is acquainted with them. Supposing this to be the case, as I do, he falls immeasurably in my estimation, (ah, Grace, don't laugh at this ; I admired, honoured him so much at one time, that my homage was worth having;) and if he has yet to learn these facts, his ignorance is unpardonable ; so that in any case, I give up making a hero of him.

" He belongs, too unmistakeably, to the school of which his friend, James Fraser, has long been the head : the school that teaches men to find fault with, and rebel against the arrangements of Providence, instead of making use of the power in their hands to better what they see amiss, by recognising in themselves the accountable agents of its will. Did not such

teaching chill even my father's warm heart, and cause his noble spirit to droop, and grow weary, while he was yet in his prime? Many men declare that they have undergone the agony and bloody sweat, Grace; but the obedience, the humility, the constancy in good works, who may lay claim to them?

"Something has occurred this morning that disturbs me. I was walking about the grounds at an early hour, when I descried Charles Trevor in the distance. He caught sight of me too, I believe, and tried to avoid me. I suspected that he had an appointment with Elizabeth, and determined to hunt him up. I did this so perseveringly, that at length the gentleman was compelled to meet my advances.

"'Good morning,' he said, very briskly. 'Whatever brings you out so early in the damp and mist, Cousin Catherine?'

"'Whatever brings you here so early in the damp and mist, Cousin Charles?'

"'Oh,' he replied, with the greatest possible assurance, 'it's because I'm an admirer of the

beauties of nature, like you ; I dare say I took the taste from your father, as I took his name.'

"‘Admiring the beauties of nature on such a morning as this ! That will hardly do, Charles. And yet there is much to admire in these great skeleton trees, that look so like ghosts of their former selves in the dim distance—in this grass, so heavily laden with the night-dews. Suppose we finish our walk together ?’

"‘Suppose you return to the house and take off your wet shoes ? I cannot countenance your exposing yourself in this way, cousin Catherine.’

"‘What a considerate relative I possess ! But really, Charles, my shoes are very strong, and I have made up my mind to a ramble.’

"‘Come along, then,’ said Charles. ‘I’m almost glad we’ve met ; for I’ve something on my mind that I haven’t told to anybody yet, and I’ve been thinking I’d best tell it to you first.’

"‘Something on your mind, Charles. My poor boy ! Tell me by all means, if you think I can be of any service to you.’

"‘Oh ! it isn’t anything about myself,’ said Charles. ‘My troubles have all to begin yet,

as they tell me at home. Well, I was walking here the night before last at about ten o'clock. It was very dark, you know.'

"Walking here at ten o'clock in the dark! —admiring the beauties of nature, Charles?"

"Oh! bother to the beauties of nature!" I was walking here by virtue of my office as envoy extraordinary from a foreign power. I was walking nearer the house than we are now, and presently I heard voices. I hid myself among the evergreens, and the voices began to sound nearer, and the two speakers stood still. I made out a good deal of what they said, and I knew them both. They were Dick Hallett and Mr. Rycroft.'

"I believe I started, but I did not speak.

"Now don't you make a trouble of it," said Charles, drawing my arm more tightly within his, "or I shall be sorry I've told you. I know I must tell somebody, because I never could keep anything all to myself in my life; and I thought I'd best tell you, as you might not wish it to go any further."

"It was a kind thought, Charles," I said—
"go on."

"Well, I heard Dick say that, if Mr. Rycroft

would give him a thousand pounds, he would cut off to America with Peggy, and he should never hear anything more of them. Mr. Rycroft said he wouldn't, and he swore, for he was in a great passion. Then Dick said Mr. Rycroft might do as he liked, and he should do as he liked ; and I heard Mr. Rycroft call him a fool. I didn't hear much that Mr. Rycroft said, because he spoke low ; but I'm sure he tried to persuade Dick to go home ; for Dick said with a great oath, that he wouldn't face that lad again (meaning Gervase), after what had been told him ; and that, if he went home in the humour he was in, he knew he should be sure to murder his wife. Then I *did* hear Mr. Rycroft say, that he ought to have knocked her brains out long ago. I heard no more, because they walked away. Now I've got it off my mind, and I shall never speak about it again. You're nothing to old Rycroft, as my father always says—no more than my godfather was, who couldn't bear to look at him : so you needn't care about it.'

" I need not say to you, that I could not help caring about it. Oh, Grace, all this is very humbling ! I sometimes think that my father

ought to have warned me against being brought in contact with Mr. Rycroft; and yet how could he contemplate that I might be? I fear that I am no better than those I am inclined to condemn. Directly my pride is touched, my self-love wounded, I am ready to start aside. I will compel myself to remember that I may be—that I am—of use here. Compel myself! Very clearly I cannot do anything better. I am not obedient: I am not humble: I do not love my neighbour even as myself.

“I walked on with Charles in silence, and presently he said:—

“‘Now, cousin Catherine, I want to talk to you about something pleasant. Did you ever fall in love?’

“Here was a turn! I believe I started again.

“‘Oh! Charles,’ I said, ‘this is tiresome! No: I never did fall in love!’

“‘But I know who did—who has done, I mean.’

“‘What! was Charles about to betray Elizabeth? No; I wronged him.

“‘Well—who?’ I asked.

“‘Gervase.’

“ ‘ Gervase !’

“ ‘ Over head and ears. He didn’t tell me : I found it out. And who do you think he’s in love with ?’

“ ‘ Nay, don’t ask me.’

“ ‘ With a certain Miss Catherine Moore.’

“ ‘ Nonsense !’

“ ‘ It’s as true as I’m here. I heard him say something when he thought he was by himself. Oh, cousin Catherine, how he does love you !’

“ ‘ Why, what an eavesdropper you are, Charles ! And this is what you call something pleasant ?’

“ ‘ Why, isn’t it ? If I had said somebody hated you, that would have been another thing. It is a glorious thing to be loved. You’ll be grateful to him, cousin Catherine, won’t you ?— you’ll be kind to him ?’

“ ‘ Kind to him, certainly, as I always have been. But I trust you are labouring under a mistake.’

“ ‘ It is cruel of you to say so. I thought you would be pleased. Why may he not love you if he likes, and if he can’t help it ? I only wish somebody would fall in love with me. As to mistakes, don’t you flatter yourself. Didn’t

I see him kissing a book you'd given him, as if it had been a—well, I don't know what? Didn't I hear him say that you were dearer to him than his own soul, and that he wished he could die for you? If that isn't love, I don't know what is; and there's no mistake about Gervase when he's in earnest.'

"Then it is altogether a painful matter, Charles. It is a pity that love should be wasted in this world, in which so many need and do not find it; and the nature must be selfish and ungenerous indeed that cannot grieve deeply, while feeling grateful for a love too large and entire to meet any adequate return. Gervase has a grateful heart, I know; but he is very young, and the day is yet distant in which he will love once and for ever. I hope you have not mentioned this to any one, Charles—that you never will?"

"Oh, I wouldn't have mentioned it to any-one except you for the world," said Charles. "In love matters I can be as secret as the grave. I have quite an established reputation of that kind, I assure you."

"You interest yourself in love matters, it seems."

“ ‘Oh, yes—and it’s jolly fun sometimes. I’ve my hands full just now, and that’s the reason why you see so little of me. When people are in love, cousin Catherine, they are very unreasonable; and I find it difficult to give satisfaction, though I am running about here and there all the day and half the night.’

“ ‘And does it never occur to you that you ought to be doing something better—that you are sadly wasting your time?’

“ ‘Why, yes ; and I seriously intend to turn over another leaf very soon. There’s about half-a-dozen young ladies that I expect will get married soon and off my hands. Then I shall resign business and shut up shop. There’s one branch that I don’t like to have anything to do with—that’s when the ladies make up to the gentlemen.’

“ ‘And you have positively been engaged in that branch?’

“ ‘Yes, all along ; but it never flourished, like the regular trade. Gentlemen stood upon their dignity and got affronted, or else treated the matter as a joke, so that there was no bringing them to the point. There’s neither profit nor honour to be got that way : more kicks than

ha'pence sometimes, and no mistake. I don't know why; but it seems to me that women were not intended to fall in love, but only to be made love to. The gentlemen are best satisfied with that arrangement, so I suppose it's all right.'

• .

"With this profound reflection, the result of Charles's large experience, our conference closed. What he said about Gervase troubled me, because my own observation had already led me to suspect as much. Without the aid of vanity a woman may readily understand the signs of devotion to herself; and I am grieved to feel it necessary that I should visit the Halletts less frequently.

"But what is all this to the horror closing around me in this house? I begin to believe that Mr. Osborne is less culpable than I supposed: that all along he has been Mr. Rycroft's dupe. How generously he has treated, how largely he has trusted this man, from whom I recoil more and more every day! How he himself will loathe him, when he learns all that I believe he yet has to learn! How he will loathe me, knowing nothing of me beyond the kinship which I disclaim! For Miss Osborne's

sake; I shall linger here awhile—but not long.
A storm will burst presently; and then expect
to see,

“Your always affectionate Cousin,
“CATHERINE MOORE.”

CHAPTER IX.

A FEW days after dispatching the foregoing letter, Catherine was tempted by a very bright sun to take a walk in the grounds after luncheon. As the grass was wet, she kept on the gravel road, and so rambled as far as the lodge-gate. While lingering there, a gentleman on horseback stopped, and respectfully raising his hat, inquired if he was right in supposing that to be the approach to Staunton Court. Catherine said he was right, and opened the gate for him; and the stranger, dismounting and throwing the bridle of his horse across his arm, walked on by her side.

It struck Catherine at once that there was something familiar to her in the countenance of this stranger. Presently she discovered that he bore a strong resemblance to Gervase. He was beyond the prime of life, but his features were

yet fine, his look open and intelligent, his eyes strong and piercing as an eagle's. He was about the middle height and broadly built; and there was a peculiar erectness in his carriage that, united with his very courteous manner, seemed to give assurance at once of a gentleman. In all these particulars he certainly bore some resemblance to Gervase. As she took note of this, Catherine's heart began to beat fast.

"I presume that I am addressing a relative of Mr. Osborne's—his daughter, perhaps?" remarked the stranger.

Catherine said she was not at all related to Mr. Osborne.

"I should first have asked," said the stranger, smiling, "if I am likely to find Mr. Osborne at home?"

"I see you are labouring under a mistake," said Catherine, greatly agitated. "Mr. Osborne has never resided here since his father's death. He lives in London."

"Then I am indeed all in the wrong. I must confess to you that I arrived in England from America only two days ago. My first business was to inquire for Staunton Court, and

here I am. Does no member of Mr. Osborne's family reside here now?"

"His sister resides here."

"Ah! that's everything! I am all right then. All right I am saying, as if I lived in a world where nothing went wrong!"

The stranger smiled and sighed, and walked on for a few minutes in silence. At length he said:—

"His sister—Mrs.—you did not mention her name?"

"His sister is named Miss Osborne."

"What! has he two sisters?"

"No: he never had more than this one sister."

"Then everything must be worse than I supposed," said the stranger, musing. "What I want is an interview with this Miss Osborne," he added.

"I fear you will have to encounter great difficulty, sir," said Catherine.

"What! after journeying nearly four thousand miles for the sole purpose of seeing her; and—do you think she will refuse to see me?"

"Oh, no! not that *she* would refuse. I do

not know how to explain myself. She lives under some restraint. May I ask your name, sir?"

"Ellersley—Robert Ellersley."

"You had a brother, sir. Is he living?"

"No: poor Frederick is dead. He left a will, and I am his executor. I have undertaken this journey in order to carry out his last wishes."

"Sir," said Catherine, after a distressing pause, "you *shall* see Miss Osborne—be quite sure of that. You will meet with opposition, which you must resist:—you must resolve to see her. Do not quit the house. I shall be there, and I will help you. I will break this intelligence to Miss Osborne, whose health is very delicate. Alas! sir, you will find that she has suffered very much!"

"Well, well, they are not the worst people who suffer greatly. You speak feelingly, young lady, and my heart warms towards you. That latter is a sign I always trust. I could not have fallen into better hands, I am sure; and I will follow your instructions implicitly. One word more: what is the name of the present master of this house?"

“ Rycroft.”

Mr. Ellersley nodded, and the two proceeded towards the house in silence. On arriving before the chief entrance, the door of which stood open, Elizabeth, who was crossing the hall, paused for a few seconds, in order to survey them, elevating her eyebrows with a very supercilious kind of surprise. She vanished as Catherine entered, with the purpose of summoning a groom. A few minutes afterwards, Catherine conducted Mr. Ellersley into the breakfast-room. And then Catherine appeared on the point of breaking down. Her face was ashy pale; she trembled; her heart beat almost audibly.

“ My dear young lady,” said Mr. Ellersley, taking her hand, “ how dreadfully you are agitated! It distresses me to see you. Pray sit down a few moments.”

“ I shall be better, strong enough by and by,” said Catherine, “ I feel sure of that. I am Mr. Rycroft’s niece, sir. I will now inform him that you are here.”

“ I’ll swear that there’s no relationship between you if he’s anything less than a nobleman!” said Mr. Ellersley before releasing her hand.

Catherine sought Mr. Rycroft in the library, where she had left him on quitting the house, but he was not there. Continuing her search, she entered the drawing-room, in which she found Mrs. Rycroft and Elizabeth. The elder lady, who looked considerably flushed and flurried, broke out before Catherine could speak.

“ Well, Miss Moore,” she said, “ I ham surprised at what Elizabeth tells me, that you’ve brought a gentleman to the house (he may be a gentleman or he may not), and ordered about as if everything belonged to you ! I suppose there’s no objections to your bringing a friend here ; but I do think it’s taking a great liberty to invite anybody without our leave. I suppose we’re *somebody* ; I suppose the house is *ours*. Your friend ought to know *that*.”

Catherine stood rigidly still until Mrs. Rycroft had finished her speech, and then in her coldest, calmest manner, she said that the gentleman was a stranger to herself, and that his business was with Mr. Rycroft, whom she was seeking. It was a real irritation to the two ladies to be thus convinced of their mistake, for they were both in a humour to quarrel with Catherine.

“ If papa was wanted, I think you might

have told me," said Elizabeth, sharply. "I suppose you saw me as I saw you. I hate such sneaking ways!"

"Really you ought to have told *me* sooner," said Mrs. Rycroft. "Well, where have you put the gentleman? Your uncle has gone out with the gardener, and I ought to see him myself. Perhaps he is a friend of ours."

"He is probably more of a stranger to you than he is to me," said Catherine in the same cold manner. "I think you had better not see him."

"Why, what do you mean? what is the matter with you? You have been allowed too many freedoms, Miss Moore, and you are growing impertinent, I think."

"Oh, I always told you what she was! I told you you would find her out!" exclaimed Elizabeth.

"If Mr. Rycroft is about the grounds," said Catherine, still speaking in the same tone, "let a messenger be dispatched for him immediately. The stranger insists upon seeing *him*, and at present he does not wish to see any one else."

As Catherine was quitting the room, Mr.

Rycroft entered, and she stepped a few paces back. His wife and daughter, now really indignant, commenced together a very wordy complaint of Catherine's conduct. They particularly wished to know if for the future Miss Moore was to be looked upon as the mistress of the establishment. She had begun to give her orders, and they had hesitated about obeying her.

"Now what is all this about?" said Mr. Rycroft angrily. "What is the meaning of it, Catherine?"

"I do not understand it, sir," said Catherine. "A gentleman has arrived who is waiting in the breakfast-room to see you. He says that his name is Ellersley."

Mr. Rycroft became perfectly livid. He staggered towards a table, and leaned upon it for support.

"Ellersley!" he repeated. "Good God, it must be a mistake! I don't know any one of the name. Where does he come from?"

"From America. He arrived in England only two days ago."

Mr. Rycroft dropped in a chair; he shook as if he had been seized with an ague.

“ What is the matter with you now ? ” asked Elizabeth hardly and scornfully, while her mother stood dumb and half-frightened. “ Who is this man that you should be afraid of him ? It seems that there are secrets between you and your niece ; *you* have given her the power that makes her insolent ! ”

“ Go out of the room ! ” thundered Mr. Rycroft, rising and stretching his arm towards the door, while all the blood rushed back to his face. “ Go ! go ! ”

He repeated the word until Elizabeth, casting around her a look of mingled hatred and defiance, saw fit to obey his bidding. Mrs. Rycroft was utterly subdued.

“ Oh, John ! ” she exclaimed, “ whatever is all this about ? ”

“ Follow your daughter,” said her husband ; “ leave me alone with Catherine. She has more sense than a dozen such as you. Not another word ! Leave me ! ”

Mrs. Rycroft quitted the room, holding her handkerchief to her eyes.

“ Now, Catherine,” said Mr. Rycroft, eagerly, “ when did this man arrive ? how ? ”

Catherine described where she had met with

him, and how they had arrived together at the house.

" You have acted with great circumspection," he said. " He spoke with you ? he told you who he was ? "

It struck Catherine at once that Mr. Rycroft was labouring under the mistake of supposing his visitor to be the Frederick Ellersley who was dead, and she did not yet think fit to undeceive him. And the time had arrived in which she might acknowledge how much of Miss Osborne's past history had become known to her.

" I have learned everything," she said ; " all the suffering, all the wrong. I have bitterly regretted having entered this house."

" *I* may do that," said Mr. Rycroft. " There was a curse on it before I put foot in it. I swear to you, Catherine, that whatever has been wrong, was old Osborne's doing and not mine ; old Osborne's and Lady Cope's. Their infernal pride made them counsel, and I obeyed their orders, because I felt myself under obligation. Now all the blame, that of right belongs to them, will rest upon me ! Curse them ! "

" You cannot deny that you have deserved blame," said Catherine. " I pray you do not

hesitate to make such full and speedy reparation as is in your power."

"And who'll give me credit for doing that? This man can claim—but, recollect, Catherine," continued Mr. Rycroft, whose terror and surprise had occasioned him to commit himself; "recollect that we had reason to believe this Ellersley had a wife living at the time he married her (pointing upward with his finger); and till he proves himself clear of that charge, he has no business here—no business whatever. What is he like? how does he conduct himself? Does he look poor—needy?"

"Certainly not poor," said Catherine. "And his speech and bearing are those of an independent, high-principled, determined man."

Mr. Rycroft bit his nails savagely.

"But," continued Catherine, in her calm, measured tone, "this gentleman is not the person you suppose. He is Mr. Robert Ellersley whose brother is dead."

"Why the devil didn't you say so at first!" exclaimed Mr. Rycroft, starting up with an angry flush on his face. "That's a different

thing altogether. We've nothing to do with Mr. Robert Ellersley, nor he with us. His brother was a scamp ; and if he attempts to meddle, I shall order him out of the house. Mind you say nothing to anybody."

"Mind you say and do nothing to compel such violent measures as will be inevitable if you hesitate for a moment in rendering full justice now," said Catherine, firmly. "For your own sake—for your family's sake, I pray you mind this!"

"What! do you threaten me, girl? I've been harbouring a serpent all this time, have I? You've been spying for a purpose, it seems; You think to better yourself by ruining your benefactors! Is that it?"

How malignant he looked! Catherine did not quail for an instant. "Think of me as you will," she said, "but I repeat—beware for yourself!"

With that malignant scowl on his face he walked out, and Catherine went up-stairs, and shut herself in her own room. She felt that a crisis was at hand, and hoped fervently that it would pass without her interference. But if

no better might be, she was herself prepared to act.

Hours passed, it grew dark, and still Catherine did not stir. At length a female servant appeared to say that her uncle wished to see her in the library. Her heart again beat fast; surely Mr. Ellersley had not quitted the house!

Mr. Rycroft met her smilingly, and handed her to a chair.

“ My good girl, Catherine,” he said, “ you must overlook my hastiness of temper just now. What has passed won’t alter my intentions towards you; and you know that it is in my power to give you a lift in life, as I shall do. I think, Catherine, you won’t refuse to help me by boldly speaking the truth.”

“ Respecting what, sir?”

“ Respecting Miss Osborne’s state of mind. This fellow Ellersley makes a point of seeing her; and I have told him that it is impossible to grant such a request. Bless my soul! she would be excited to a state of downright raving madness! I have explained all this to him, and he seems to suppose that the account is an

invention of my own to put him off. The absurd fellow (he has all the assurance of an American about him) refuses to leave the house till he has had an interview with her; but he'll soon tire of that game—there's no fear. All you have to do is to corroborate what we say about Miss Osborne—what you know to be true."

"And this is what you have determined upon?"

"To be sure," said Mr. Rycroft, who seemed to have recovered all his confidence; "it is the only proper course. Miss Osborne has been placed under my charge, and I must protect her from such annoyance as this, for it could be nothing else to her. I intend to be civil to Mr. Ellersley, who will be sure to take his departure when he finds that it is of no use stopping. You can assure him that it is of no use."

"You are quite determined, then?" said Catherine. "You will not for any consideration act otherwise?"

"Certainly not. Why do you put such questions instead of answering me? You don't

object, I suppose, to declare your knowledge of Miss Osborne's insanity?"

"I shall say nothing," said Catherine.

"Well, I dare say that will be best. You'll say nothing—not even if he questions you?"

"Not even if he questions me," said Catherine.

"That's a good girl. What you say I can trust to. There's the first dinner-bell; so run off to your glass."

Catherine walked up-stairs, but not to her glass.

At dinner she met Mr. Ellersley, who seemed to make himself quite at home; for he chatted freely with Elizabeth, who seemed flattered by his notice, and paid great attention to Mrs. Rycroft. He recognised herself with a very polite bow, and a quick glance of intelligence that told her where his trust lay. To the great delight of Elizabeth, he took no further notice of her.

And, while Elizabeth was laughing and talking gaily, the beat of Catherine's heart was increasing at a fearful rate. During the dessert Mr. Rycroft remarked that she was unusually

dull ; and Mr. Ellersley, merely noticing the remark as an interruption, just glanced towards her, and then resumed his conversation with Elizabeth.

Catherine at length complained of not feeling well, and begged leave to retire. The leave was readily given ; and Elizabeth rejoiced in the idea, that, for once, Catherine might not help seeing she was not wanted.

“Good-night, young lady,” said Mr. Ellersley. “I shall have the pleasure of seeing you again to-morrow ; for it seems to be the wish of my hospitable friend here that I should not take my departure yet awhile. Good-night.”

“I am so uncertain a person that I may again make my appearance presently,” said Catherine, looking him full in the face. “Therefore, I will not return your ‘good-night.’”

“O very well,” said Mr. Ellersley, laughing. “The sooner you make your reappearance the better for me, I hope.”

And so Catherine walked out of the room. Mrs. Rycroft and her daughter exchanged looks that spoke volumes. Both had recognised in Catherine’s words and manner an insolent in-

dependence and defiance of themselves. Woe to Catherine when the morrow came ! Woe to her on every future morrow that she might pass at Staunton Court !

CHAPTER X.

THE conversation became more general after Catherine had quitted the room. Half an hour had passed, and Mr. Ellersley was giving some account of the particular part of America in which he had resided almost from his boyhood, when the opening of the dining-room door caused Elizabeth to turn her eyes towards it. Seeing Catherine on the point of entering, she elevated her eye-brows in the old supercilious way, exclaiming :

“ Well, I’m sure !”

Mrs. Rycroft, whose back was to the door, understanding from this that Catherine had really taken the liberty of making her appearance again, was preparing herself to rebuke that young lady very sharply, when, to her surprise, every one at the table rose from their seats, and, with various expressions o

countenance, stood looking towards the door, Then she herself turned round, and also stood up.

Catherine was there certainly, but not alone. By her side, leaning on her arm, appeared a tall, elderly woman, whose pale, deeply-lined face and uncovered grey hair seemed painfully to match her otherwise unrelieved, flowing, black garments.

Mr. Rycroft spoke first. He was white, and he trembled ; but he spoke with authority, as he advanced to where the two females stood.

“ What is the meaning of this ? ” he exclaimed, in a voice hoarse with passion and tremulous with fear. “ You, madam,” addressing Miss Osborne, “ go back instantly to your own room, which you ought never to have been allowed to quit ! As for you, Catherine Moore, prepare to leave my house instantly. How dare you put yourself forward to interfere in matters of which you know nothing ! ”

“ Stand back ! ” said Catherine, who had recovered all her firmness. “ You, who have interfered too long—who have no right to interfere now—stand back ! ”

“ Stand back, if you please ! ” said Mr. Ellersley. “ I am here, as the natural protector of

my brother's widow. Keep a respectful distance, or I may be tempted to toss you out of the window."

"Who are you?" shouted Mr. Rycroft, foaming with passion. "By what right do you assume such a tone to me in my own house?"

"This house is mine!" said Miss Osborne, with an imperious gesture of the hand. "I am mistress here, in the absence of my brother, whom I now know to have been all along deceived, like myself! Do not dare to give another order, or make use of any threat! Exercise such authority as you have, and command your wife and daughter to leave the room. I have business with this gentleman, and I require their absence."

All this time Mrs. Rycroft and Elizabeth had stood aghast, the former especially; but Elizabeth's temper was not readily subdued.

"What prevents you summoning the servants and turning these two meddlers out of doors?"

"Miserable girl, whose insolence I have borne so long!" said Miss Osborne, "cannot you understand that your day is over? Quit the

room before *I* summon the servants in order to compel you!"

"Mrs. Rycroft—Elizabeth—go out of the room directly," said Mr. Rycroft. "Leave me to deal with these people."

Mrs. Rycroft had now roused herself.

"I want to know," she said, "if this is my house, or if it isn't!"

"Don't trouble me with questions, but go!" said her husband; and finding that she still did not move, he took her by the shoulders and led her to the door, whispering something in her ear that seemed to have the effect of quieting her.

Elizabeth anticipated this treatment by flinging out of the room.

When Mr. Rycroft again faced his company, after shutting the door, he saw that Miss Osborne had seated herself in his own easy-chair, and that Catherine stood by her side.

"Sit down, if you will, but not near me!" said Miss Osborne, addressing him. "And do not dare to utter a word until I have received the intelligence for which my soul thirsts. Robert Ellersley, what have you to tell me of my husband, who is dead?"

“This to begin with,” said Robert Ellersley, “that to his latest breath he protested that he had no hand in bringing about the life-long separation, which I can also bear witness he lamented to the last.”

• Mrs. Ellersley, as we must name her now, clasped her hands together and pressed them on her grey head.

“I knew it!—I knew it!” she exclaimed. “I always said so! I was cheated, betrayed on all sides—I, who might have been happy and loved!—I, who so pined for love! But this is consolation at last! Tell me more—tell me more!”

“With his last breath he desired me to send his love to you, if you were living—to you and to his child, whom he always believed to be living.”

“Oh, Frederick! kind to the last! what was it they made you believe of me! And my child!” continued Mrs. Ellersley, starting up and glaring round at Mr. Rycroft, who quailed before her, while yet determining to baffle it out:—“Man, who helped to rob me of my husband, what of my child, whom I also believe to be still living?”

“This is your work, mistress!” said Mr. Rycroft, shaking his clenched hand in the direction of Catherine. “You came here to be a spy, and a tale-bearer, and to make mischief, did you?”

“No,” said Catherine, quietly. “What I have done I do not regret. I have sympathized with a deeply-wounded spirit: I have striven to cheer with hope a desolate and almost broken heart. I have done nothing more. I have left in your hands the power of now satisfying Mrs. Ellersley.”

“You are false to her as you have been to me!” shouted Mr. Rycroft. “You lie in saying that I can satisfy her!”

“Then you compel me to declare that it is you who are false,” said Catherine. “You compel me to declare that Mrs. Ellersley has a son living—near her—of whom she may be proud.”

“Joy! joy at last!” cried Mrs. Ellersley, sinking back in her chair, overcome with emotion.

“Wretch!” exclaimed Mr. Rycroft, literally foaming with rage, “this is the way you return the favours I have heaped upon you—you, who

were a beggar when I picked you up, as you know ! What was your father but a vagabond ? What—”

What was that noise at the door ? Whose strong hands were those about Mr. Rycroft’s throat, shaking him as if with the intent of sundering soul and body ? Catherine saw Mr. Osborne, and knew him at once ; and her heart again beat fast, and her lips became white and rigidly cold. She recognised James Fraser, who shut the door and then stood with his arms folded, looking on.

“ Who is it you are calling a beggar ? Whose father was a vagabond ? ” thundered Mr. Osborne, using his arms vigorously. “ Beggar—vagabond—hypocrite—liar ! —let us know one another at last ! ”

He hurled Mr. Rycroft from him with violence, and that discomfited gentleman fell in a heap on the floor, where he remained for some minutes stunned and motionless. Catherine crossed the room and stood over him.

“ This is unmanly, sir, ” she said, looking boldly up to Mr. Osborne. “ You are exceeding your right, whatever that may be—you are forgetting that you are yourself not without sin ! ”

"I know you, Catherine Moore," said Mr. Osborne—"know and honour you. I know that in your soul you do not take this man's part!"

"Neither his nor yours," said Catherine, firmly. "My uncle" (none had ever heard her so name him before) "is about to be altogether discomfited, and I will not desert him at his great need."

"Do not interfere with *her*, Walter," said Mrs. Ellersley, who had also recognised her brother. "She cannot act otherwise than nobly, uprightly, generously!"

Mr. Osborne recognised the presence of a great soul in Catherine. His spirit bowed in homage to hers; his mood changed, softened. He turned his gaze from her to his sister; and it was well for Mrs. Ellersley that Catherine had begun to influence him already.

"Caroline, my poor, my unhappy sister!" he said, taking both her hands in his and looking down upon her—"my God, how you have suffered!"

"I have suffered!" was the brief response.

"As you have been wronged—on all sides!

I see it now ; I acknowledge it ! Say that you forgive me, Caroline !”

“ I forgive none until I have looked upon my son !” said Mrs. Ellersley. “ I am an Osborne, and I have been wronged, as you acknowledge !”

“ Be satisfied that you will see him before long,” he said ; “ I dispatched a messenger for him the moment I entered this house. Every instant I expect him to arrive.”

“ So near me !” said Mrs. Ellersley. “ It is well ; but in the meantime, I wait !”

Mr. Rycroft was now gathering himself up, with Catherine’s help. She helped him to a chair, and still kept her place at his side. Mr. Osborne, who had for a moment buried his face in his hands, looked up again.

“ Do not condemn me too severely, Caroline, until you have heard all,” he said. “ I swear to you that everything in the past has been misrepresented to me by yonder false hound. The truth is new to me as yesterday ; and if God had not sent you one of the noblest of friends, I should have been in the dark at this moment.”

“ I owe everything to this friend whom your

violence has driven from my side !” said Mrs. Ellersley, stretching her arms towards Catherine.

“ Dear lady ! believe that my heart is still with you !” said Catherine.

“ Curse you ! this also is your doing, is it ?” muttered Mr. Rycroft between his clenched teeth.

“ Not mine, but God’s,” said Catherine in the same firm tone. It was clear to her that Grace Lee had caused her letters to reach Mr. Osborne’s hands, and she did not regret having written them, though a burning blush overspread her face, while vainly striving to remember all that she had said in them respecting Mr. Osborne himself.

“ God has sent me another friend this day,” said Mrs. Ellersley, placing her own hand on one that, during this scene, had never been removed from the arm of her chair. “ This is my husband’s brother, Robert Ellersley.”

“ For God’s sake, Mr. Ellersley, give me some clearer understanding of this whole matter than I have at present,” said Mr. Osborne. “ I am still too much in the dark.”

“ Then it is indeed high time that you were enlightened,” said Mr. Ellersley. “ I am a plain

man, and I shall tell a plain story. My family, Mr. Osborne, belonged to the city of Norwich, where they had been settled for many generations. My father was not what is styled in common parlance a gentleman, for he was in trade—he was a cornfactor. It is enough for me to know that his own family, and all who knew him intimately, recognised in him a gentleman of God's own making. Not necessarily, but like many such, he did not prosper in the way of this world. He was too open of heart and hand, too generous and confiding for that.

“ He failed in business when I, the eldest of four children, was about seventeen years of age; but, throughout all, he retained the respect of his fellow-citizens, and commenced life afresh.

“ Soon after these events, and before I was eighteen, a distant relative decided upon emigrating to America with his family, and wished to take me with him. I also wished to go, and my parents gave their consent. I went to America, and did not see England again until two days ago. Of that I will speak presently. Years passed, and from time to time sad news reached us from England.

“ First, my father died, leaving his family very

slenderly provided for. One after the other, my two sisters died of consumption, leaving my mother and my brother Frederick, who was then about eighteen, alone. At this time I was prospering, and I helped them. I wished them to come out to me, but my mother's health was failing, and she could not undertake the journey. I was on the eve of embarking to see her once more, when I received the news of her death. Then I put off my purpose, and wrote to my brother, more earnestly requesting that he would come out to me. I referred him to an agent in London who would supply him with all means, but he still held back. At that time he was clerk to a solicitor named Ratcliffe, the legal adviser of Lady Cope, who resided in the neighbourhood of Norwich. He was frequently employed in carrying messages to his master's clients, and in this way an intimacy sprung up between himself and the niece of Lady Cope, who resided with her."

"Oh, happy days! only days of happiness I ever knew! why were they made so terrible to me?" exclaimed Mrs. Ellersley, clasping her hands and bowing her head over them.

"I will say this for my brother Frederick,"

continued Mr. Ellersley, "he had a warm, affectionate heart. Like my father, he was generous and over-sensitive. I had not given up all hope of inducing him to join me in America ; but I was surprised when one day he suddenly made his appearance without having previously apprised me of his intention. He was then twenty-three years of age, and in many respects he disappointed and disturbed me. His letters had shewn him to be of a frank, open, cheerful temper, and I found him gloomy and reserved. I fancied that he had met with some disappointment of the heart, and I questioned him without success. He was very young, and I confidently trusted that time would effect a change in him. Here also I was disappointed. As a man of business he plodded on steadily ; he accumulated some wealth—I can bear witness to the blamelessness of his life, out yonder, to its close—but to the last he was a gloomy, reserved man. We were both of us grey-headed, Mr. Osborne, when he at length confided to me the secret of his life. Then I learned that he had more than ordinarily loved—that he had been more than ordinarily proud—and that his love and his pride had alike received a death-blow. That

blow he believed to have come from your hands, Mrs. Ellersley."

"Spare me! spare me!" cried Mrs. Ellersley, crouching and writhing like one in bodily pain. "It was true, and yet not true; they deceived me as they deceived him!"

"I suspected as much when I heard Frederick's story. I have no intention of striving to clear my brother from all blame; I am no friend to what are termed unequal marriages," continued Mr. Ellersley, again addressing himself to Mr. Osborne. "Though, mind you, the true inequality, according to my notions, does not exist in externals. My brother's story was this:—

"He had been clandestinely married to Miss Osborne, the niece of Lady Cope, at the church of Goole, a village in the neighbourhood of Scarborough, during a visit paid by Lady Cope to the latter place. His wife returned with her aunt to their usual place of residence; and during several subsequent months the meetings of the two were connived at by a female servant of the establishment, who was not entrusted with the secret of their marriage. Frederick's wife dreaded the resentment of her relatives,

who were proud, and Frederick vainly importuned her to fly with him at once to America.

“ If I am stating what is not true, Mrs. Ellersley, you will correct me.”

“ It is true—all true!” said Mrs. Ellersley. “ He did so importune me, even on his knees; and the dread of all about me was too heavy upon me, and I held back. Would God I had obeyed his wishes as I ought to have done! Would God I had gone with him!”

“ Amen! Would to God you had!” said Mr. Osborne, fervently.

“ The intimacy of the two was at length discovered by Lady Cope, who thenceforward kept strict watch over her niece,” continued Mr. Ellersley. “ My brother was refused admittance to the house. He wrote, demanding to see his wife, and his letters were not answered. He was at length waited upon by some underling in the employ of Mr. Osborne, who represented to him that his wife had become equally ashamed of the connexion with her family, and was equally determined to break it off. This same underling was authorised to proffer my brother a large sum of money on the understanding that he consented to forego his

claim, and leave the country immediately. . It strikes me that the man to whom this business was intrusted is now before 'me.'

"I acted according to the instructions given me by Mr. Osborne and Lady Cope," said Mr. Rycroft, boldly. "They were both half mad with pride and rage, and I had to obey them, or quit their service altogether."

"My brother," continued Mr. Ellersley, "could not believe what was reported to him of his wife; he rejected with the indignation and scorn it deserved, the offer that was made to him. He was very young and sensitive, as I have said before, or they would not have found it so easy to deal with him as they ultimately did. He demanded an interview with his wife; he demanded to hear from her own lips that it was her wish to give him up; and he promised to resign all claim to her if he found what was reported, to be true. That interview was granted; and he learned from the lips of his wife—his wife about to become a mother—that she voluntarily resigned him."

"They had made me mad—they had worked me up for the occasion!" said Mrs. Ellersley. "They had told me that he was married when

he pretended to marry me ; that his wife was living and ready to see me if I wished to see her, but I would not. They told me that he had publicly boasted of having made me his dupe ! My heart was broken, and I said to Him, it was my wish that we should meet no more !”

“ I resign all claim to the fabrication of those reports,” said Mr. Rycroft, modestly.

“ I never heard of them until now,” said Mr. Ellersley. “ If they had come to my brother’s knowledge, he could readily have proved their falsehood. I have little more to say ; my brother described himself to me as remaining for a time like one in a dream. So perfect and entire had appeared to him the love subsisting between himself and his young wife that he could not thoroughly believe what he had seen and heard. He lingered about until he heard that Lady Cope had departed with her whole household for Yorkshire. On that same day he received a letter by post. It was from his wife.”

“ God help me, and forgive others !” exclaimed Mrs. Ellersley, sinking back. “ I never wrote it ! I never wrote a single line to him !

I wished, longed to do so, for I soon began to suspect that I had been deceived—and not by him ; but they watched me too closely ! What of that letter ?”

“ Frederick always carried it about with him, but I never saw it until he was on his death-bed. It was quite sufficient to produce the effect it did on a character like my brother’s. In it his wife taunted him with his low origin and dependent circumstances ; reproached him with having taken advantage of her inexperience in order to obtrude himself on a great family ; and finally declared that she would rather die than live to see her own folly and degradation proclaimed before the world. No names were mentioned in the letter, and it was not signed ; but it struck me immediately on reading it that it could not have been the production of the individual to whom it was attributed, not merely on account of its worldly tone, but because it was so evidently worded with a view to producing a particular effect, that I felt assured of its having been written by one who had studied my brother’s character in ways that his young wife could scarcely have been supposed to have studied it, besides that she would not be likely

to turn the study to account thus readily. I said this to my brother, and he did hope that I was right. The letter, by whomsoever written, had the effect that was certainly desired. My brother suddenly formed the determination to quit England for ever, and he came to me, as I have told you."

"I knew that we had both been deceived; but this is too much!" said Mrs. Ellersley, bowing her head again, writhing again in her strong agony.

"Scoundrel!" cried Mr. Osborne, looking towards Mr. Rycroft, "this was your doing!"

"I posted that letter," said Mr. Rycroft with effrontery; "it was written by Lady Cope."

"You see, Mr. Ellersley, what the family was which your brother was not deemed worthy to enter," said Mr. Osborne, bitterly. "I confess to you that I am compelled to believe this man, though I know him to be a liar!"

"Well, well, we must all bear what is to be borne," said Mr. Ellersley, at once pleased and pained by this avowal.

"But how was it that I have remained in ignorance of these facts during so many years,

Caroline?" asked Mr. Osborne, laying his hand on Mrs. Ellersley's arm.

Gently but decidedly she shook the hand off. It was evident that her heart did not readily turn to her brother.

"Did you not understand that the old curse of family pride—stronger than family affection—divided us as effectually as if one had been dead?" was the reply. "Did you not believe on the report of others that I had disgraced you and myself, and so stand aloof where I might not reach you? Were not my early sufferings, my later bondage, all known to you—all disregarded by you?"

"Go on—cut me to the heart's core—humble me altogether. I begin to feel that I deserve no better!" said Mr. Osborne, dropping his face in his hands.

"Three or four times during the course of those long years, when I felt myself on the verge of going mad indeed, I ventured to write to you, though I was assured by yonder man that you would neither see nor correspond with me, and that the disgrace I had brought upon the family had determined you never to set foot in this house, or show yourself in this neighbourhood

again. Sometimes my heart and brain seemed alike on fire; and then I remembered myself—felt for myself—believed I had a right to demand what miserable satisfaction I sought. I had been assured that I had no husband—that my child was dead; and I had no faith in those who gave me these assurances. I demanded a declaration from yourself that what I had heard was true; and in case of your making it, I promised to be silent for ever. No reply ever reached me from you; and I know not whether to believe that my letters had been withheld from you, or that you had become too hardened against me to answer my prayer."

"Most solemnly I protest to you now, Caroline, those letters never reached me!" said Mr. Osborne. "I never received a line from you beyond those periodical epistles, that were so brief and meagre, that they might well dissatisfy me as they did!"

"Then rest assured that you never heard from me at all!" said Mrs. Ellersley. "I know nothing of the epistles of which you speak. I never wrote to you at all, except on three or

four occasions, as I have said, when I wrote with a purpose."

"Do you hear that, villain!" exclaimed Mr. Osborne, his strong frame quivering with indignation. "This, at least, was your own doing, hypocrite and liar as you are!"

"Who taught me to lie?—who taught me to be a hypocrite?" asked Mr. Rycroft, boldly. "Thank them that are dead for whatever has happened, for it was they that ordered everything. Thank yourself, that wouldn't be at the trouble of making a single inquiry during all those years!"

"What the man says is true!" said Mrs. Ellersley. "The blame rests with many, not with him alone. Think of me during all those years, borne down by a consciousness of the desolation on all sides which I was taught to believe was attributable to my own conduct alone! If I erred long ago in admitting to my heart the first and only love I have known on this earth, admit that I have been punished!"

"It is a wonder to me that you did not go mad in earnest," said Mr. Ellersley.

"I am an Osborne, and I was strong to endure," was the reply.

"Oh! Caroline, I am humbled!" said Mr. Osborne, resting his arms on the elbow of her chair, and bowing his head on them.

"If you've got anything more to say to me, I can answer it," said Mr. Rycroft, who had recovered all his natural assurance, and now gloried in putting it forth. "I knew long ago that it was a thankless office to serve an Osborne. I can tell you, Mr. Ellersley, that if, years ago, the gentleman at your side had been made acquainted with his sister's marriage, he would have been quite as furious about it as the others were. It was a match that wounded the family pride, and in the eyes of the world Miss Osborne had disgraced herself. I knew that a separation would be the best thing for many reasons. Mr. Osborne declared that his daughter should never have a penny of his, and I knew he would keep his word. In addition to your brother being the common man he was, and the poor man he was, I was assured on all hands that he was both idle and dissipated. He was unprincipled, or he wouldn't have acted as he did."

"You have an ugly trick of attacking others, while seeking to excuse yourself, sir," said Mr. Ellersley. "Dissipated my brother never was—

never could be ; there was nothing vicious in his nature. Neither could he be systematically unprincipled ; and it is some proof of his having belonged to an honourable race, that I, his brother, have journeyed so many miles with the sole purpose of seeking the child to whom he bequeathed his property."

"That man belies me as he has belied your dead brother," said Mr. Osborne. "In my youth I was as ready to acknowledge the worth of an honourable man, of whatever station, as I am now. I was made acquainted with the shams of this world at an early age ; and there were circumstances that would have led me to rejoice at my sister's escape to the protection of any honest man. They who distorted the truth, and mercilessly heaped disgrace upon my sister, knew this and so dreaded my interference. Her marriage, and the birth of her child, were kept secret from me ; and what was told me ought never to have been uttered. I believed it because—"

Mr. Osborne paused, All the blood in his body seemed suddenly to rush to his face and swell the thick veins in his temples. Presently he stood erect and said :—

“ You see me now, a man who claims nothing on the score of race. As an individual, I come poorly recommended to you. I have allowed myself to be grossly imposed upon; I have neglected many duties. It is a small matter to acknowledge errors and imperfections so glaring as mine; but having acknowledged them, will you take my hand as a friend and brother, and co-operate with me in dealing out justice to all at last ?”

“ I will with my whole heart !” said Mr. Ellersley, with energy ; and the two hands lingered together in a strong grasp.

“ I have scarcely left myself the right to say, what is yet true—that I cannot longer endure the presence of that man !” continued Mr. Osborne, glancing towards the chair in which John Rycroft still sat. “ I suppose his particular sins are not mine ; and I cannot help the human infirmity that compels me to loathe him. Sir, I am now master of this house ; and as soon as may be I require you to leave it. Take with you whatever you may claim as your own —but go ! I require no account of your past doings or expenditure. You ought to be rich, and doubtless are so. All I require of you is that you never let me see you again !”

“ All I have to say is this,” said Mr. Rycroft, rising, “ I am quite willing to go ! My character will stand good where yours won’t, and if you try to blacken my character, I’ve my own tale to tell of them that have lived in this house, and that you’d perhaps best not like to hear. As to not requiring accounts, you never gave me to understand they would be required. I wish you joy of your new relation, the brother of the attorney’s clerk, I’m sure. I wish Mrs. Ellersley joy of her son, who after all may not like to leave Peggy Hallett. I tell you what, sir,” continued Mr. Rycroft, flaring up as a candle does sometimes when on the point of being extinguished, “ if my daughter dared think of forming such low connections as you’re obliged to put up with at last, I’d murder her ! That’s my spirit, sir ; and I wouldn’t exchange it for yours !”

Having said this, Mr. Rycroft approached the door, before which, moveless as a statue, stood the colossal figure of James Fraser. Mr. Rycroft was aware of Catherine following him, and he turned sharply upon her.

“ Keep your distance from me, mistress !” he said. “ No more beggars, no more spies in my

family ! Don't dare to claim any relationship with me or mine ! Surely your dirty work has earned its wages ? I have nothing to do with it or you !"

A sharp cry escaped the lips of Mrs. Ellersley as she again stretched her arms towards Catherine. One stride sufficed to place James Fraser at the side of Catherine, whose arm he placed in his own, keeping his firm grasp upon her hand. In the same instant, Mr. Ellersley started from his chair, and moved forward ; and first and foremost was Mr. Osborne, with his hands again about John Rycroft's throat.

"Base, contemptible hound !" he exclaimed, "did *you* ever dare claim relationship with so noble a creature as this young girl ? If you did, beware how you presume so far again ; for the angels round God's throne are not more certainly alien to a black villain like you, than she is ! Don't struggle with me, man—you have brought this on yourself, and you shall bear it ! I swear that nothing short of the consideration I must have for her, could have induced me to bear with you so patiently as I have done ! You dared threaten me, just now, and for her sake I did not tell you how I despised

your threats ! You are expecting to pass out of this house quietly, and if her presence did not deter me, I should hurl you out at once, with all the ignominy you deserve ! Do you understand this ? Do you understand that you are less than nothing here, and that she is everything ? By heavens I will make you understand ; for nothing short of her intercession can restrain me now ! ”

Mr. Rycroft, half-choked, almost black in the face, gasped out something about the law and an assault, that was not heeded. Catherine, pale as death, agitated by contending emotions, exclaimed,—

“ This also is unworthy of you, Mr. Osborne. Release him—let him go ! ”

A significant look from Mr. Osborne induced Mr. Ellersley to open the door wide, and then Mr. Rycroft did go—with an impetus. He stumbled against some one who saw fit to apologise for being nearly knocked down ; and a few minutes afterwards, Gervase was in his mother’s arms.

CHAPTER X.

AT an early hour on the following morning, Mr. Rycroft and his family took their departure from Staunton Court. Catherine's generous nature was touched with a regret for which they would not have thanked her ; and her own novel situation did not yield her any full happiness, though she could not help believing that her presence there was necessary to the happiness of others. Necessary to Mrs. Ellersley first, who murmured if she passed out of her sight ; to Gervase, whose heart's best love had been given before meeting that new claim upon it ; to James Fraser, who seemed to cling as he had done before, to the daughter of his friend ; to Mr. Ellersley, who followed her like her shadow, and still loved none so well ; to Mr. Osborne—she had become necessary to *his* happiness at last !

She recalled her childish thoughts about him when she used to brood night and day over the story of his connection with his friend and his friend's sister, as it had been related to her by nurse Rae. She recalled her later and deeper feelings on learning how constant he had been in his attachment to that early friend. And still later emotions, all having some reference to him, crowded upon her in the shape of recollections, compelling her to feel that all her life through, some thought of him had formed a part of herself.

Death had severed for her the nearest ties of blood, and her high-toned, affectionate nature, and a thoughtfulness not common in one of her age, had occasioned her to cherish, and claim kindred with, and hold fast by, as a stay in the great arena of life, all of whom she had ever heard or read of as being distinguished by noble and generous traits of character and conduct.

In this way she had from her childhood cleaved to Mr. Osborne. It had been a fact, that while never sympathising with the Rycrofts at all, she had yet felt at home at Staunton Court, simply because she knew that it was his

natural home. She had further clung to the place after becoming acquainted with, and entering into the confidence of Miss Osborne. She really loved Miss Osborne; all the more, perhaps, because she had done battle for her, and conquered.

All the neighbourhood of Staunton Court had become dear to her; for the sake of Dr. Frank, whom she liked well—for the sake of the Trevors, whom she loved, and who loved her.

Catherine thought she stopped there, but she did not. Her heart trembled while recalling the devotion of Gervase. She could not disguise from herself that she had been more than flattered by it. The world had never appeared dreary to her until now, when it seemed necessary that she should enter it, leaving all these friends and associations behind her.

What greatly troubled her now, was the reflection that Mr. Osborne must have very different thoughts and feelings with respect to herself. Her presence must constantly remind him of the man whose base dealing, from the beginning, had led to much wrong-doing in himself. She was of his blood, and must share in his

disgrace. The affinity that she could not acknowledge at all, would be recognised by Mr. Osborne, and must influence him.

But Catherine, in her proud humility and self-abasement, did not do justice to Mr. Osborne. The constitution of his mind, his early training and trial, and his later experience, had all conspired to put away from *him* littleness of every kind. In judging Catherine, he could only look at herself, and he did so look, and was more than satisfied. It was true that her letters to Grace Lee had been placed in his hands, and they had afforded him a study of her character. He had recognised in herself and her parents the kind friends respecting whom nurse Rae had spoken to him so enthusiastically.

With the help of James Fraser, and subsequently of Mr. Trevor, he was enabled to enter fully into the character of her father. He had seen and learned to honour greatly her relatives, Grace and Rupert Lee. In the country he could not avoid seeing how greatly she was beloved by all who knew her; by his sister, whose interests she had entered into so bravely; by the Trevors, one and all—by Gervase and

his reputed mother—by Dr. Frank, who now prided himself on having first discovered how truly noble her nature was. To crown all, he knew that she was detested by the Ryecrofts.

Here was much to ensure consideration and esteem, but Mr. Osborne felt drawn towards Catherine by a sentiment of affectionate admiration and gratitude. It was a great matter to him that this true-hearted, straightforward girl had fallen in his sister's way ; that no inferior nature had been allowed to meddle with matters that would ill have borne any less delicate and generously disinterested interference. He felt that he owed Catherine a large debt, which he yearned to pay in kind. It was a joy to him to see what satisfaction her presence afforded his sister ; and her own lonely position was also a matter of rejoicing to him, because it afforded a hope that she would not resist the strong claims upon her to remain where she was.

While these two natures kept together so closely, though in a measure apart, all the gossips in the neighbourhood of Staunton Court were exceedingly busy. The events that had taken place were astounding ; and nothing was

more marvellous than the quietness with which so many changes had been effected.

Mr. Rycroft and his family had quitted the neighbourhood altogether, leaving Miss Moore still an inmate at the Court ; Mr. Osborne had seemingly settled down in the home of his ancestors ; his sister had assumed a new name, had recovered her reason, if she had ever lost it, and acknowledged as her son, one with whom all were familiar—Peggy Hallett herself had become an inmate of Staunton Court—an uncle of Gervase, his father's brother (really a most gentlemanly personage), had turned up ; and beyond these bare facts, not a scrap of information was to be obtained anywhere.

Dr Frank, who visited at the Court, and was always cordially welcomed, was assailed on all hands for additional information ; but Dr. Frank declared that he knew nothing more than was generally known, and that he saw nothing wonderful in it. The Trevors were beset with inquirers, who received much the same reply ; and, for want of nourishment, public curiosity soon seemed on the eve of dying out.

Within the walls of Staunton Court, other changes were about to take place. Mr. Ellers-

ley, having satisfactorily discharged the business he was upon, was anxious to return to America, where he had left a wife and family. James Fraser, who could not live long out of London, meditated returning there. Peggy Hallett, in whom Mrs. Ellersley readily recognised the woman who had attended her when her child was born ; who satisfactorily proved that she had known nothing of the truth beyond her strong suspicions ; who was treated on all hands with honour and consideration ; respectfully and gratefully, but firmly, declined the offer made her to pass the remainder of her days at the Court as a friend, rather than a dependant ; for, strong and right-minded as she was, she would not desert the husband who had deserved so little at her hands.

She expressed a wish to leave the country with him ; and it was therefore decided that, in addition to an annuity for her own life, a sufficient sum should be advanced to enable her husband to commence life anew, and afford him the chance of retrieving his character in a distant land. Mr. Ellersley promised to take charge of both in the event of their quitting the country at the same time with himself, and further,

to provide them a settlement near his home.

With this purpose, he lingered longer than he had intended. James Fraser was the first to depart, and one evening, after dinner, he announced his intention of returning to London on the following day.

"I suppose it is generally understood that Miss Moore accompanies me," he added. Catherine had told him that such was her intention.

"Oh, no ! no !" exclaimed Mrs. Ellersley, clasping the arm of Catherine, who sat next her. "She mentioned this intention to me, but indeed I cannot bear parting with her. I have not yet learned to live without her—shall I ever learn to do that ? She is too good and kind to leave me just now—she knows how necessary she is to me !"

Catherine sat silent and embarrassed. It did indeed seem cruel to give pain to this heart that had been desolated so long ; it was hard to wrench herself away, clinging to all around her as she did. And yet it seemed only right that she should go. At the moment, an effort either way was beyond her power. *

Mr. Osborne was about to speak, when his eyes accidentally lighted on Gervase, and were arrested by the whole expression of his countenance. What could be the meaning of that sudden pallor, of that agonised look, directed so unmistakeably towards Catherine? Did he, who had known her so long, love her with a love surpassing that of all others? Yes! he felt sure of it. He saw, too, much of the struggle that was going on in Catherine's heart. A glow of pleasurable emotion pervaded his whole soul, and flooded his face with a new light. He approached his sister and Catherine, and pressing their already clasped hands together in said—

“Here must be no parting. It would be parting mother and child. Catherine will not abandon the good work she has begun, and into which she has put her whole heart. She belongs to us; God has given her to us. She must henceforth for us form a part of the happiness to which she has already so largely ministered.”

How confidently he spoke, as if the secret desire of every heart present had been laid bare to him! When Catherine felt on her forehead

the kiss with which he seemed solemnly to seal what he had said, her misgivings of many kinds dropped away from her. Through the mist of exquisitely happy tears broke upon her the radiant light of surrounding happy faces. Had she indeed deserved that every wish of her heart should be thus fulfilled? Catherine scarcely thought so; but it was a glorious moment for her; she felt so grateful, so securely happy, so entirely satisfied.

So James Fraser returned to London without her. It was one crowning satisfaction to Mr. Osborne to feel that it had been in his power to minister to the happiness of Gervase, of whom he already felt proud, for he had not been slow to discover the fine, manly nature, the energy of character, and the many noble qualities that distinguished this newly-found relative, and gave assurance of his becoming a true, if not also a remarkable man. His great, warm heart, widely opened to healthy influences at length, readily divested itself of the worst bitterness that had oppressed him through the past, and gave glad welcome to the love and joy now breaking around him as breaks the light of a genial morning; and, like it, gaining strength.

as the hours passed on. He had sufficient consciousness of his own faults and failings of the past to temper the fervid meridian glory towards which he was approaching, and enable him to receive with humility and thankfulness the great good that had fallen to his lot. Indeed, to do him full justice, his exceeding happiness was much rather the result of an eager desire to promote the happiness of others than of any first seeking or craving after it in a spirit of selfishness.

In no such spirit did he now think of Avice. The wide waste of her sad and solitary life lay spread before him, and he longed to draw her out of it so entirely that its stern realities should thenceforth appear to her as no more than a dream. This one chief thought and wish of his heart produced in him a feverish impatience. He felt so sure that he was beloved by Avice *now* as he might have been at first if the hardness and selfishness that are too rife in the world had not sundered them. He felt so sure that she was longing for his presence. He wrote to her frequently, but no written words might convey to her what he chiefly had to say. His care for others at

present compelled his bodily presence where he was ; but the strongly-winged spirit within him hovered alternately over Staunton Court and Stanley Place.

CHAPTER XI.

IN the excitement of first witnessing her daughter's surprise and satisfaction on learning the change in her fortunes, and being introduced to so much that was new to her, Avice experienced some true happiness. When the step was taken, her sanguine and trusting nature led her to anticipate only good from this great change. Removed from the influence of the Misses Thorpe, surrounded by means so ample that she need have no care about hoarding, Lydia's mind would certainly expand ; and such natural feeling as she had would eventually find free play. This hope had every encouragement ; for Miss Deane, who was an accomplished woman, and greatly esteemed by Avice, at her request readily undertook the office of completing Lydia's education.

And for a time Avice's heart was compara-

tively at rest. During this interval she chiefly occupied herself with acts of beneficence; for sorrow is to be met with everywhere, and actual want is to be met with everywhere; and wherever wealth abounds there is sure to be an abundance of claims upon it. As at Burnham and Thorne, Avice made herself especially beloved by her poorer neighbours. Not that her neighbours of the higher classes did not especially love her also; for in this new setting of gold she was generally recognised to be a gem of the first water. Loved, looked up to, courted on all sides, what more could Avice want?

Some sense of want did creep into her heart, when nearly a fortnight had elapsed from the time of her parting with Mr. Osborne without her having heard a word from him. The few hurried lines she received from him at length re-assured her. How she felt for him—once more in his home, and brought face to face with the unhappy sister from whom he had been estranged so long! How fervently she prayed that this meeting might bring peace to both! How sure she felt that even from this sister he would shortly turn to herself!

Some domestic trouble soon began to show

itself. Lydia was self-willed: too old and too conscious of her own importance to defer at all to the authority of Miss Deane. Lydia took greatly to the Countess de Torres, who took to her.

• The Countess took to Lydia with a purpose. Through her she hoped to influence Avice as she had not been able to do of herself; and the progress she had already made in Lydia's good graces was highly gratifying. For Lydia, attracted only by the lower excellencies of this world, thought a great deal, to begin with, of her aunt's title. The latter's plausible manners —her volubility of speech—her studied indulgence—her avowed love of gaiety and show—her familiarity with the great world and great people—her pride—her very contempt for Avice's meek spirit, and quiet habits, and care about the lower orders, only covertly expressed to Lydia, took the girl's whole ready soul as by storm. Lydia was quite prepared to be very exclusive indeed—very pompous and arrogant —very conscious of the deference and the privileges due to her in her new position; and her mother's manner of supporting her own dignity did not suit her at all. Nothing dear or inte-

resting to that mother touched her; and even less than it had been at Burnham and Moorlands was the promise of these two spirits harmonising together.

The Countess de Torres found a little management on her part necessary, in order to make her own life tolerable. Avice loved the country, loved her old home, and especially at present had no wish to leave it. It was the more inviting to her, because her more distinguished neighbours presently departed with the intention of spending their Christmas elsewhere, leaving behind only the wealthy bachelor, who vegetated on his estate all the year through, and the clergyman and his family. Avice, who had been accustomed to seclusion, who had no taste for the society and the display in which her sister delighted, whose heart and spirit alike needed repose, hailed with thankfulness this prospect of not being intruded upon for some time to come. But in other ways her rest was invaded and altogether broken up.

The Countess de Torres had set her heart upon going to London, and Avice must go with her. If it had been possible that the Countess could have been brought to such a strait as to

have no choice betwixt immediate death and a prolonged life of dulness like that in which Avice seemed to delight, she would have made her choice at once and died. The Countess was conscious of possessing talents, which she was by no means inclined to hide, and which only needed a wider field for their display and operation in order to produce the results she desired. She had lately, to her great joy, received an apologetic letter from Lord Otley, in which he greatly regretted that unavoidable circumstances had prevented him calling upon her as he had wished ; and expressed a hope that, on the return of herself and Mrs. Thorpe to town, himself and Lady Otley would have the pleasure of calling upon both : the latter being especially interesting to Lady Otley, who had heard her highly spoken of by his mother and sisters. He and Lady Otley were at present detained in town by the serious indisposition of their revered relative the Dean ; and, as the Countess was aware, his mother's infirmities kept her in town during all seasons.

Nothing could have been more satisfactory than this letter to the Countess, who was perfectly aware of being indebted to her sister's

changed fortunes for this courtesy from the Otleys. She prized it for the very reason ; feeling that under the same circumstances the same motives would have influenced herself. And conscious of Avice being alien to her in nature, remembering that Avice had expressed a determination to keep aloof from the Otleys under any circumstances, she kept this friendly communication to herself, feeling confident, from what she had already seen of Avice's yielding spirit, that when suddenly brought face to face with her now friendly relatives, she would forget all cause of animosity and greet them cordially.

Therefore the Countess, relying upon her own tact, appealed to Avice in other ways, having previously prepared her niece to follow on her side. Lydia had never seen London, and Lydia particularly wished to see it. It was an important part of education to familiarise the young with objects of great national interest ; and while shut up in an old house in the country, there was no hope of enlarging Lydia's very contracted notions of things. Avice herself, if desiring seclusion, would find it to perfection in London at that season. The Countess appealed to

Avice's lowest tastes. She reminded her that at Christmas especially the young expected some added enjoyment; and that the only treat that could be afforded Lydia was this journey to London, upon which she had set her mind.

Avice was conquered, of course. She remembered that, long ago, Christmas had always brought happiness to herself. It had brought Phillip from school or from his chambers; it had usually brought Miss de Burgh; and at this particular season her father had always brightened up, because it was a joy to gather his children around him. Lydia had never experienced the happiness of family re-unions: her solitary youth had never been gladdened by youthful companionships. Christmas at Burnham and Moorlands had chiefly been noticeable because at that particular time the Misses Thorpe killed pigs, and manufactured an astonishing number of pork and mince pies, which, together with spare-ribs and chines, were mostly disposed of as presents to friends in the town and neighbourhood. Avice was fully conscious of all the disadvantages under which her daughter had laboured, and she could not withstand any reasonable wish that she might express.

She was indeed pleased that it was in her power to gratify Lydia, who rarely expressed an interest in anything; and accordingly preparations were made for an immediate departure to Curzon Street.

In proportion as Avice was disappointed, the Countess was gratified by Lydia's evident want of true interest in whatever she saw in London. There was something in her apathy, in her cold, unconcerned manner, agreeing so well with the Countess's notions of the highest breeding, that the latter could not help rejoicing to find in the constitution of her niece's mind much to atone for and counteract the effects of her limited country education. Besides that there was nothing to surprise her, Lydia was not to be abashed by anybody; and in these respects no born and bred aristocrat would ever be able to find her at fault.

With the certainty of having done little to gratify her daughter, there rushed upon Avice the consciousness of having greatly constrained and put aside herself. At Stanley Place, surrounded by familiar things, she had not felt so lonely as she now did: Mr. Osborne's prolonged absence had not been so irksome to

her. More than ever she missed the kind words, and tender attentions, and perfect sympathy that had lately quickened in her heart a new life that now drooped because their sustaining power was withdrawn.

True, she began to hear more frequently from him, and nothing could be more cordial than the tone of his letters; but otherwise left wholly alone, she could not avoid occasionally yielding to misgiving. There was so much at stake. She felt so surely within herself the utter absence of all power to bear up under so heavy a blow as might be preparing for her. Within her still sore heart, mocking all her efforts after self-sustainment, lay fluttering, shrinking, quickening at times to a great terror, so much painful apprehensiveness of being again and more deeply wounded, quivering as she still was under the frequent pang of unhealed wounds. She was so consciously unfitted to take any part in the kind of life she was now required to lead by the Countess de Torres, by Lydia, by the world. Her whole barren life had been made to stand out so clearly and prominently in its grim and repulsive sterility, under the searching light that had suddenly broken around her,

revealing at the same time a region fertile and beautiful, betwixt which and her eager but faltering and uncertain footsteps lay a something that might be impassable—a gulf that might be her grave. She felt as would feel one cast alone by a great storm on a desert shore, while catching sight in the distance of a noble ship that might bring deliverance or pass unconsciously on its course. While Avice so lived, every perception painfully quickened, every pulse of her heart overstrained and ready to snap asunder, or yield to the influences that would tranquillise, and renovate, and thrill them with unspeakable joy; the Countess de Torres was triumphantly congratulating herself on the prospect of securing a greater degree of mastery and power over her sister and the means at her disposal than she had hoped for. Avice, so poor in spirit, so apathetic in matters that were everything to the Countess, was only too easily managed, so that there was no difficulty except that she was somewhat in the way. Great glorification the Countess promised herself during the coming season in London—that wilderness to Avice in which she was feeling herself lost.

long absence of Mr. Osborne inspired her

with confidence and hope, and she was, still covertly, on the best of terms with her uncle's family. The junior Lady Otley had been compelled by indisposition to defer her promised visit; and the infirmities of the dowager, as was alleged, alone prevented her showing every attention to her dear nieces. The Countess contrived to receive these communications and respond to them. She considered it an act of duty to call upon her venerable aunt, and was received cordially; and her report of Avice was sufficiently encouraging to induce Lady Otley to volunteer a first call. In any event it was a great matter with the Countess to secure this recognition of herself from the Otleys; and, with respect to Avice, who still remained in ignorance of the intended honour, she had too much confidence and effrontery to fear for the result. But the Countess was wrong in supposing that Avice could not be in earnest; that she was not in earnest when she had expressed her determination to hold no communication whatever with the Otleys.

At length Clementina de Torres was destined to see her sister in a new light.

Both were seated one day in the drawing-

room during the absence of Lydia, who had gone out for a drive, accompanied by Miss Deane. Avice was employed in copying from a catalogue a list of books that she intended to purchase for her daughter ; the Countess was reclined on a sofa, apparently occupied with the contents of a morning paper, but, in truth, busy with her own not very profound thoughts. A loud double knock at the street-door caused Avice to start, and turn a shade paler ; but she did not lift her eyes, and a smothered sigh seemed to crush down the hope fainting on her heart. Nevertheless, some one was admitted, and steps were heard on the stairs. The door was opened, and a footman announced, "Lord Otley."

"Our dear cousin, Avice," said the Countess, bending towards the latter for an instant, and speaking in a tone at once of congratulation, confidence, and satisfaction. "My dearest Otley, I cannot tell you what a pleasure this is ! It is such a reminder of old times ! Avice, my love, this happiness is overpowering you. Pray sit down."

But Avice, who had risen from her chair, stood as rigidly still and white as if she had

been a statue cut in marble. Her native dignity was, being roused in the most painful way possible.

She saw at once that this interview had been brought about by the manœuvres of the Countess (seconded, of course, by the venality of the Otleys), and she resented such interference, exercised in defiance of her own understood feelings on the subject. She remembered against Otley, in particular, his whole offensive conduct towards Phillip; his disrespectful treatment of Miss de Burgh, from whom she had learned both these particulars. He was further unwelcome, altogether and inexpressibly repugnant to her, on the score of those to whom he belonged.

Avice had never felt so determined as she was in that moment to put the whole race away from her with the full, free force of her matured judgment, her calmly ready instincts, and unsassable independence of will in matters of great import. She felt sure that there was nothing in the heart or nature of this shallow man and hollow relative, that could be seriously wounded by her repulse; and yet it was a situation that sharpened all her own fine-edged, quick sensi-

bilities, to the deep wounding of herself. The pain thus forced upon her, quivered in every fibre of her being, and caused her lips to tremble as she spoke :

“ You must see, Lord Otley, that I did not expect this visit ; you must believe that I did not desire it. You are here to congratulate me, doubtless, but congratulation under all the circumstances, and from you, can amount to nothing more than a crowning mistake. I never was more bankrupt than I am now in everything that could render an intercourse with your family desirable or durable. As far as you—all of you—are concerned, I am bankrupt in respect, in confidence, in affection. With this worst description of poverty, there cannot be any true or lasting alliance. I ought not to have been compelled to utter in words what might have been well understood without them. Twenty years ago, there was a chance of these relations between us being reversed ; but now, beneath all the waste and suffering, the hard teaching and stern experience of those twenty years, the chance lies hopelessly buried. Report thus much of me, and that past—if anything, and no more.”

The blood returned to Avice's face as she spoke, her eyes kindled, her voice steadied. Lord Otley, who afterwards reported to his family that he "never saw anything like it," meaning everything that befel him on this memorable visit, did not move from the exact spot to which he had originally hurried, apparently transfixated by some species of astonishment new to him ; the Countess stood apart, dumb with rage and consternation ; and there yet seemed to be a difficulty about ending the scene, when the door was once more opened, and, familiarly as if he had been in his own house, Mr. Osborne entered, and advanced to the side of Avice. That is, he would have advanced straight to the spot where she had stood, if with an impulsive bound forward she had not met him, and placed herself at his side, heart and soul, as the sudden rejoicing glow, spread over her whole countenance, testified. After one exulting and admiring glance, poured full on the fair, trusting face lifted to his own, while placing on his arm the small hand of which he seemed to take a very positive kind of possession, the very grimmest of Mr. Osborne's grim expressions of distaste dwelt on his swarthy

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visage while saying, as he glanced around the room,

“ The Countess de Torres has company, I see ; she will excuse us.”

Saved ! saved ! It is a glorious moment in any life when the heart can spontaneously give utterance to its rejoicing consciousness of a great deliverance ; and such a moment was vouchsafed Avice now, as Mr. Osborne led her down stairs and into the parlour, to which he had first introduced her. The door that closed upon them shut out no world, for they were the world to each other. United so long in heart and soul, sundered so long and in vain, there was no need of a waste of words in order to prove the high and close, and tender relationship that drew them together. In one long, fervent, silent embrace, was gathered about them all the broken links of the love and faith to which both had been steadfast, while their earthly recognition and reward had stood beyond the pale of human hope.

And then, with her head resting on Walter Osborne’s shoulder, her hand clasped in his, Avice listened to his now unreserved communications respecting his own past. There scarcely

needed this full confidence in order to draw forth all her own in such an hour ; and, in truth, the tender interest between them, that lay apart from all other surviving interests, alone claimed and received the avowal that her heart had treasured his remembrance, had consciously trembled at the utterance of his name, during the heavily silent years lying betwixt one great day and this greatest of all days, enriched by the matured growths of so much vigorous life. What each had hitherto needed, and yearned for, and obtained glimpses of, in a certainly sympathetic kind of dreaming, was found by both now ; entire understanding, perfect confidence, and love knowing neither beginning nor ending, old, and yet ever new, as are the primeval hills.

This consummation of a great happiness, in which two souls bore equal part, was one of the noble triumphs that may be achieved in time by faithfulness and high belief ; by singleness, and purity of purpose and aim ; that stand out grandly amid all grand endeavour in vindication and assertion of the everlasting life of man. The rich and enduring nature of Avice yielded freely as it received ; owning with true human humility the blessed influences that had

operated upon her, as upon the lesser works of God operates the spring rain and summer heat. No more faltering for her now ; no more dragging down to the dead levels of a life unworthy of herself. Saved ! saved !

CHAPTER XII.

WHAT little remains to be said, need not be long dwelt upon. If Avice's trial had hitherto been more severe than falls to the lot of many, few, perhaps, ever attain to such great happiness as was hers at length, with so perfect a sense of its value, and at the same time so large a capacity for its enjoyment. As Mr. Osborne's wife, she entered upon a new field of experience altogether delightful to her.

* The small circle now gathered in and round Staunton Court contained many elements of goodness, of tried worth, of tried endurance, too, with which she could readily sympathise. Her husband's sister became to her a sister indeed. Her whole heart went forth to meet the venerating love of Catherine Moore, whose entrance into the world she remembered as having

been expected on that memorable bygone day, and whose after twofold interest in herself she shortly learned. Dr. Frank was her friend already, as was Mr. Trevor, whose family she soon learned to love. Very soon also she fully shared her husband's pride in Gervase, who, with his fine intellect and manly nature, took his new position at once, as if he had been bred to it.

Out of her own rejoicing sprang matter of rejoicing on Lydia's account. Lydia's manners and outward manifestation altogether improved under the new influences now brought about her and hedging her in ; for as certainly as sordid and narrow views, and evil companionships, tend to deterioration of mind and character, a constant communication with what is elevating and good will improve and quicken the most sterile nature and ordinary mind.

Here we leave Avice. The Countess de Torres, who entertained a profound horror of being again buried in the country, after remaining some time in possession of the house in Curzon Street, discovered and announced the fact that the climate of England did not agree

with her constitution, for which reason she had determined upon residing wholly abroad. Her present income, derived from one source, is so ample as to allow her to live even luxuriously ; but she is in the constant habit of loudly lamenting the penury to which she has been condemned by the unnatural selfishness of a sister for whom, in former years, she had made many sacrifices.

Mr. Rycroft took an early opportunity of expatriating himself altogether, by disposing of the property belonging to him in and near Selby. He now resides in the neighbourhood of London, and is greatly looked up to as a wealthy man. His daughter, who has been made fastidious by many offers, remains single ; but this fact is not a matter of any importance to George Liddell, who has found a firm, helpful friend in Mr. Osborne, and who long ago discovered some superior charm about Lucy Trevor, the sister of his brother-in-law.

Gervase, having devoted two years to severe study, has now been for some time past happily married and settled in an elegant home, built expressly for him on a site chosen by himself.

It is situated not far from his old home, and its terraced gardens slope down to the sea-shore. There his mother dwells, so happy in the love of her son and daughter that all the wrong and sorrow of the past are forgiven, if not forgotten. And there Catherine has the great happiness of frequently receiving as her guests Grace and Rupert Lee, and of knowing that, in his rising celebrity, the latter gratefully acknowledges her uncle's generous and cordial help. She speaks of her "uncle" with great pride now. The title belongs alone to the noble man whom she honours so much, and who so warmly manifests his attachment to herself.

The news from America has been cheering; for Mr. Ellersley, who has well fulfilled the trusts reposed in him, reports favourably of Richard Hallett, who applies himself manfully to honest labour, and in all respects shows signs of having become a reformed man. His wife receives the reward of her forbearance and devotion. Her proud joy in the prosperity and happiness of him whom she still styles her son, sheds a glory on the winter of her life; and the assurances of that son's affection, which she

quently receives, soothe and console her under the sorrow of separation.

The great, dumb man, James Fraser, is still generally recognised as one of the profound thinkers and successful orators of the day—is still accessible to the few privileged to penetrate the inner recesses of that dreary waste within himself which no sun shines upon, and no early dew refreshes, and no life-renewing breeze with its glad promise visits. He may yet deepen the doubt, and chill and darken the hope, and so prostrate the energies of many hearts; but, as heretofore, he will obey the instinct within him, that warns him against meddling with woman's faith—no matter whether in contempt or not. The power which he despises, the high trust that he marvels at and compassionates, shall yet rescue many out of his hands; and even at the eleventh hour he also may see the Lord in the land of the living.

The Misses Thorpe—still flourish, more demonstratively proud than ever now, and very loud in praise of their dear sister-in-law. Elsewhere death has been busy amongst the proud of this earth; and the great world has lost one

of its distinguished ornaments, and the church one of its shining lights. For the two latter assertions we have the authority of the *Morning Post*, which recently sent forth the following paragraphs :—

“ We greatly regret having to announce the death of the Dowager Lady Otley, which took place yesterday at her residence in Brook Street. The deceased lady, whose many virtues rendered her an ornament to her high station, was in her seventy-seventh year. Her death will place many distinguished families in mourning.”

Again :—“ It is our melancholy duty to announce the demise of the venerable Dean of —, who expired suddenly on Tuesday last, having experienced an attack of apoplexy. The reverend dignitary, whose well-known zeal and labours in the cause of religion need not be dwelt on here, has left to the world a bright example, which his brethren will do well to follow. He was in his seventy-ninth year.”

The Dean left at least one example which it might be dangerous to follow—that of a man indulging his love of good feeding to excess,

and paying the penalty of his excesses at so late a period of life as to stand a fair chance of escaping it altogether in the course of nature. The Dean was one of this world's favoured and fortunate men.

Drop the curtain—thou in whose hands its many folds have trembled ere they fell. Thou, doubtless, art conscious of abiding at times in a vast and mysterious solitude, to which none around thee have right of access, lacking that clear understanding of thy proper self, that pass-key of wondrously-complicated workmanship, matched by none other, whose undoubted possessor may, perchance, never cross thy narrow path amid the crowded wastes of this lower world. If it be so, see that thou thyself at all times enterest upon it worthily and reverently; for to thee it is holy ground. See that thou fill it with no grovelling thoughts, making of it a store-house in which to hide the evil thou wouldest not have men see; for so it would become haunted with horrors, and a terror to thyself. Bring to it the aspirations of a pure heart and lofty spirit; for it is capable of being beautified so that thou mayest find in it a welcome and glorious rest. Do this latter, and

thou shalt never find thyself alone; for thou shalt have an abiding consciousness of thy full right to claim that highest, and most promising, and nearest kinship of all—a kinship with God.

THE END.

